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A Vessel for Offering

by

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Chapter One

This was certainly a good idea, this shimmying about inside ducts and vents and metal casements which thunder alarmingly beneath the unwanted weight of his passing. His life has been reduced to a pointless series of mechanical motions: forward with the elbows, plant them on a seam for traction, drag the carcass behind; pause a moment to catch a breath because it's only been, after all, a few hundred meters of constant inchworm contractions through a space barely large enough for his shoulders to pass, let alone his entire body. Someone who didn't know better might be tempted to think that he was going soft if he stops too often.

So, he fixes his eyes straight ahead and tries to gauge his progress, but the flashlight's beam is jiggling too much for him to make an accurate guess. The strap that's supposed to keep the light snug against his forehead has been pulling loose for the last ten minutes. It's just another aggravation to toss atop the mounting pile. It stinks in here, too. Not the clean, coppery stink of sheet metal and industrial coolant that one should reasonably expect from ductwork, but some noxious chemical combination of sweat, dust, mildew and other assorted skanks that defy ready identification. He thinks about just succumbing to the heat and exertion and odor and just allowing himself to pass out. Let some other idiot worry about how they were going to get him out of here.

Oh yes, it had been a good idea, indeed. Whoever had devised this plan in the first place should be given some sort of citation. With a hammer. To the forehead. Until he was freaking dead.

Now the truth is that he's an adult. He's been inside his share of tubes and tunnels and cramped, clammy spaces. He's not normally one to give up in the face of a little grit. It's not the getting dirty that he minds at all, nor the heat and odor, nor the hysterically gibbering claustrophobe chained up in the closet in the very back of his mind. Rather, it's all the intersections. The right angles, to be precise.

He hates those. Hates 'em. Absolutely.

There are only so many joints in the human body capable of performing a ninety degree maneuver. The pelvis, the knee, the elbow, sometimes the neck, a few other odds and ends. A man forcing himself through a skintight metallic tube like raw bratwurst crammed into sausage casings uses all of them, and then finds that he must manufacture some new ones (or at least makes the old ones serve new purposes) if he doesn't wish to get himself permanently wedged between a terminal hither and yon.

He's been finding creative ways to torture his body thusly for the last hour or better, so he feels qualified in making the determination that as right angles go, he hates the one he's confronting now most of all, a particularly diabolic specimen in the cosmology of Demonic Perpendicularity Choirs he's been formulating as he has gone along.

One of the planes in question is a chute of unpleasantly heated air boiling up from the main cooling tanks of the Van Nuys reactor. The other, the one he currently occupies, is a (currently) slightly less infernal duct branching back toward the Sub-Deck Kappa, Section Six tech-maintenance pod. Under normal circumstances, this duct is supposed to be a standard internal cooling tube loaded with envireon refrigerant and absolutely human tissue toxic, maintained at a steady hypothermia inducing eight degrees centigrade. Which it was, right up until about an hour ago when they'd cut off the flow at the main valve and flushed the tube with neutralizing agents for the sole purpose of shoving him in through the nearest access vent.

The tube is supposed to be kept chilly because of the core, of course. Or rather that because without the induced chilliness, the vents that cooled the core would very shortly start to bake, then warp, then ultimately fail to provide safe and adequate heat exchange, which in turn tended to quickly result in things like radioactive contaminants spewing under extremely high pressures into other parts of the ship that don't seem upon initial inspection to be related to this duct in this place at this particular moment in time. The engineers

have stressed all of this in the very recent past, over and over again. The engineers said that under normal operating circumstances the exhaust from the core is saturated by the microscopic envireon particles until it all evens out, until there's a nice equilibrium point established that keeps everyone happy and glow free. An elegant system, frightfully complex, not to be messed with except in cases of dire, dire emergency lest ducky circumstances suddenly and catastrophically unduck themselves.

From his perspective, things are far from ducky already, here where the HVAC tube lips over into a vertical shaft that plummets all the way down to the reactor core. (Though the air in the shaft itself has been by this time scrubbed and rescrubbed, thoroughly nanomesh strained, then scrubbed once more for good measure until all the nasty radioactive bits have been purged and it was perfectly safe for consumption. Or so they said. "They" being a fairly nebulous concatenation of People Who Knew Such Things and People Who Issued Assurances so normal folk wouldn't have to worry about the obscene risks they were asked to take.)

Wedge at the zero point between planes, contemplating the theoretical infinity of these axes with his nose and eyes and top of his head peeking over the edge of the HVAC tube and his re-breather unit bruising his cheeks because unlike the straps for his headlamp, these are too tight, is Ray Marlowe. He is sweating profusely inside his rubberized, slip resistant coveralls. His face is smeared with dark lines that look like camouflage grease paint, but really only mark the places where he has wiped the perspiration from his brow with the condensate, dust-bunny grit that inevitably gathers inside HVAC tubes.

Ray has lain here contemplating his assault of the vertical shaft for a number of minutes now. It is a delaying tactic, a shameless procrastination. He has no interest in continuing the chase. The molten heat of superheated reacting agents emanating up from the core streams past his face in waves as thick and suffocating as a winter stack of grandma's old feather comforters. He imagines as he peers over the edge that he can see the lava glow of the cooling tanks four hundred meters directly below his current position, like peering into the mouth of a dubiously quiescent volcano.

It is an unpleasant and completely fabricated hallucination and he knows it. He just doesn't particularly want to do the part that comes next.

This is how it works: Nature, in its vast and quasi-nefarious complexity, has determined that there is a corporate value in the evolution of a particular type of creature whose sole contribution to the planetary biosphere is to recycle the detritus of other creatures. These are the scavengers, the bottom feeders (quite literally) of the animal kingdom--your hyenas and rats and barnacles and other generally disgust-inducing entities--who serve the imminently valuable purpose of making certain that waste products disappear and carcasses are broken up into conveniently smaller bits and that most other living things don't find themselves buried up to their necks in the byproducts manufactured by basic processes like living and eating and procreating and excreting and eventually keeling over. Perhaps even more importantly, they make certain that no biological resources go to waste in what is ultimately a closed ecological system.

The lesson being: nature is a closed environmental system.

Starships, curiously enough, are also closed environmental systems.

Once upon a time, some hotshot, smartass engineering geek with too much imagination or more creativity than sense determined that most folks who traveled about in starships were sick and tired of being made physically sick and tired by the cocktail of laboratory biogenerate mosses and molds and single-celled organisms typically employed for the purpose of recycling starship waste. Biological organisms, no matter how carefully engineered, had a distressing tendency to overproduce themselves, to evolve into annoying flesh or structure devouring slimes, to spontaneously generate lethal spores or find other, similarly disturbing ways to manifest a hostile response to having been subjected to the extreme environment of outer space.

Similarly, this aforementioned engineering geek realized that it would create another subset of discomforting circumstance to pack a starship with rats and hyenas and the like in order to process waste products with a level of efficiency approaching that of the natural world. Hyenas have too much of a tendency to eat indiscriminately if allowed to run loose, thus posing a danger to the edible-looking human types who happen to crew starships. And live rats, as well as having promiscuous reputations that would have created serious population control issues inside a few generations, had displayed a historically documented fascination with items like electrical wiring and electronics boards and any of the thousands of other technological gewgaws which were tedious to replace, unreasonably sensitive to abuse and more or less essential to the proper functioning of an *in transit* starfaring vessel.

Thus, the doubly aforementioned hotshot engineering geek, who was really merely a cog in a team of engineering geeks, designed, developed and built environmentally and aesthetically consistent mechanized rats to take the place of their organic counterparts in the vacuum-sealed circle of life that was the space voyaging craft, *Paraclete*. (As well as all other space voyaging vessels, Ray might suppose if he chose to think about it at all. Which he didn't. At this point in his career arc, *Paraclete* was the only starship in which he happened to possess anything like a passing interest, and it had more than enough happy little idiosyncrasies to keep him occupied. Other ships could go screw themselves, or more likely, screw guys like him who were charged with keeping the idiosyncrasies from becoming glitches, the glitches from becoming problems, and the problems from sooner or later blossoming into critical threshold events that would make the klaxons blare and people run about in a variety of serious or intense postures searching either for someone to blame or someone to come up with a good idea for keeping said space voyaging vessel from plummeting into the gravitational field of a brown dwarf that had no right to have planted itself directly in their flight path.)

Ray Marlowe has been charged with the singular task of retrieving one of the wayward rats that populates the service decks of the starship which has, for reasons unknown, gotten itself stuck and broken somewhere in the tube above him. If possible, he would like to complete this mission without having to subject himself to the vertical ascent of the primary core cooling shaft. He ponders the possibility of just remaining where he is and calling out sweetly to the malfunctioning unit in hopes that it will scurry down to him. The rats are equipped with a frightening array of aural, optical and chemical sensors. On the other hand, so are human beings, and there's nothing in his experience that is more detrimental to professional dignity than a grubby man crawling through ventilation ducts being overheard by half the ship's service crew imploring the return of a drone rat as though it was a recalcitrant kitten.

He really has no desire to subject himself to that sort of abuse.

He unclips the signal tracker from the breast pocket of his coveralls. Ziggy has already calibrated the device to pick up the rat's unique-signature radio transmissions, but Ray punches in the particular rat's code sequence once again. He hopes that Ziggy has made an error, that the tracker will give him more useful (i.e. less hazardous) information than it did prior to his tube crawling adventure. It does not.

What it does tell him is that the rat has not moved in the last hour. This would normally be good news. There are few things worse than chasing an ambulatory rat with a software bug through kilometers of cramped tube. But this rat has chosen to lock up its mechanicals somewhere roughly one hundred meters above him, clinging by electromagnetic crampons to the wall of the vertical cooling shaft. He knows from the error reports spat forth from the rat dialogue processor back in the shop that the rat detected an anomalous concentration of radioactive discharge through the vent and gave pursuit. The concentration was well within the bounds of human health concentration guidelines, but like most input/response parameter driven machines, the rats give less of a hoot about what is optimal than about what they perceive as the proper functioning of their universe. Microscopic particles of radioactive isotope were apparently an offense to this rat's binary worldview.

Ray was not normally a fan of individual initiative. Rogue rats like this one were part of the reason.

He curses a half dozen times as he returns the tracker to its designated pocket. A dozen more expletives escape in the process of contorting his body to access other, more remote pockets on his coveralls, followed by a full cannonade of scorched-earth profanities while he maneuvers the newly retrieved magnetic cups over his knees and hands, and triple-checks that they're strapped tightly in place.

He tests the distance from his tube to the far wall of the cooling shaft. By hanging most of his upper body over the edge, he can almost brush the wall with his fingertips. He also manages to almost lose his balance and drag his entire body into freefall down the length of the cooling tube, and it occurs to him that he doesn't like so much having valued parts of his organic being dangling over the roiling exhaust of a reactor's core. A new approach is called for.

What he eventually settles upon is the rotation of his body in the cramped HVAC tube so that he faces away from the ship's gravitational center. From this position, it's simply a matter of clamping onto the vertical wall above him, locking the magnetic grips, and slowly extending his reach until he's drawn himself completely out of one tube and into the other.

Fixed at the palms and knees to the solid flexsteel ductwork, he is more than capable of hanging in place as long as the laws of electromagnetism hold. Except, of course, that he's attached to the wrong side of the tube. A situation that can only be remedied by detaching one arm and one leg from the wall and extending them across the shaft to the other side, then anchoring there, setting the grips, deactivating the first set and ferrying them over to the new landing zone and fixing them in place once again. He spends a great deal of time reminding himself that it is essential he carry out these steps in the proper sequence before actually performing them.

After that, it's a strict regimen of mind-numbing and laborious effort. Unseal right hand cup, reach up, plant and set the grips. Unseal left hand cup, reach, plant, grips. Unseal right knee cup, extend, plant, grips. And so on, all the time trying not to think about the fact that he's trusting his entire weight to the physical (and theoretical) properties of four scuffed and unimpressive electromagnets roughly the size of a coffee mug if you stacked them one on top of the other. Not to mention *assiduously* avoiding the thought that that if the magnets failed, he'd plummet four hundred dizzying meters straight onto the nanomesh filters that stood between him and the cooling tanks. Assuming he survived the fall, the mesh would be almost certainly be irretrievably damaged, thus flooding the vent with a fog of steam and radioactive pollutants that would boil his eyeballs in their sockets, sear the hair right off his head, probably curl the skin from his bones like a bunch of old parchment and, if he was lucky, kill him after a few uncomfortable minutes.

Not thinking such things performs wonders for his concentration, and Ray makes admirable progress in a short time.

Five meters below the rat, the tracker begins to vibrate in his breast pocket. For half a second, Ray believes he has just suffered a mild infarction and nearly wets himself. He looks up, sees the rat looking down at him--hanging upside down on the wall, in fact--and experiences a woozy shudder of vertigo. Two ships passing in the night, Ray thinks, then gets his balls firmly in hand and humps it the rest of the way until he has the rat's nose pressed against the top of his head.

The nose is cold, which is what he would expect from a robotic multi-function sensor drone encased in a pseudo-metallic fiber carapace. If the casual observer somehow neglected to notice the rat was constructed entirely from non-organic materials, he or she might be struck by how rat-like the rat was--the expected chubby rat body, the long rat face, the coiled and icky rat tail. Even the delicately clawed and prehensile paws were rattish. Ray didn't know if this extreme mimicry had been aesthetic or functional, only that it was a little creepy in a hip sort of way.

At this moment, the rat is doing a big bunch of nothing except hanging on the wall.

"What's the matter with you, then?" Ray says.

At the sound of his voice, the rat's small, dark eyes brighten. Its antiquated ten gig processor runs through a voice recognition routine that ties Ray's particular vocal pattern to an id conversion algorithm that identifies him as an authorized maintenance profile. The rat recognizes him as help, and utters a forlorn chirp.

"Not a complete blowout. That's something."

The rat answers with a complex chatter of beeps and whistles translated directly from the binary signal. The diagnostic server down in the shop would know exactly what those meant, and what the rat has recommended that he do to fix it. Ray, on the other hand, has no idea.

He maneuvers himself a bit higher on the wall of the shaft until the rat is even with his chest and plays the beam of his flashlight over its chrome carapace for indications of structural damage or scorch marks from overheated motors. There's nothing obvious, and this is definitely not the place to begin taking the drone apart.

"Okay, buddy, let's see if we can't do this the easy way."

Ray shrugs his left hand free of its magnetic cup and wiggles his fingers beneath the rat's body until he's got it wedged in the crook of his elbow. He tugs against grip of the rat's crampons. The rat doesn't move.

"Voice command override, Mr. Rat."

It responds with an affirmative-sounding squeak.

"Release electromagnetic locks."

Where there should be a click, there is only silence. Ray tries again. "Cut power stream to electromagnetic locks."

The rat chitters hopefully at him, but that seems to be the extent of its assistance. Ray tugs on its torso a few more times with no better result.

"This isn't good, buddy," he says. "You know what we're going to have to do now."

It does not, in fact, know. Nor would it actually care if it did know. Ray understands this, but he hates it anyway. It's sloppy for one thing. And it offends him on a visceral level, mostly because it makes him feel queasy.

He extracts himself from the rat and retrieves the small saw from the zippered thigh pocket of his coveralls. For a few tedious moments, he plugs in new batteries, exchanges blades, flips between settings. He doesn't want to have to monkey around with his equipment while he performs the surgery. Like a battlefield triage doctor, he wants the amputations completed with the minimum of fuss.

The diamond tipped saw sounds exactly like a dental drill. He has to force himself to keep his eyes open, to actually watch what he's doing. His brain flops around inside his skull as though squirming away from his optical input. His stomach crawls away somewhere in the vicinity of his anus and begins to pout. Ray cuts through both of the rat's forepaws before he remembers he should be holding the tail.

He doesn't breathe until the work is done, the saw is jammed back in its pocket and the rat, roughly the size of a burly tomcat, is snuggled against his belly. For seven full minutes afterward, he does nothing but apologize.

He keeps his eyes averted from the four shiny and bodiless paws clamped to the shaft wall.

The rat chirps merrily, poking its nose into ribs and gall bladders, sniffing at belly buttons and livers--performing god-knows-what sensory examinations of this new biological terrain.

"Don't bite me," he says.

It does, of course. Ray figures that makes them about even.

They're resilient little creeps, these rats--nearly as resilient as their true-life counterparts. The rat is on its side on the worktable, making more of its annoying chirrups and wiggling its nose at the minute fluctuations in the atmosphere's chemical signature. Every few seconds, it flexes the new limbs Ray has attached from his stockpile of spare parts. The severed limbs have gone into a bin of damaged parts ripe for scavenging or experimentation or simply held in reserve to jerry-rig workable replacements when they had inevitably used up all the pristine components. A co-ax fiber line stretches from the rat's anus to the diagnostic server array, with the business end being plugged into an access port in the back. In this way, the rat and the computer exchange loads of pointless information about its recent malfunction.

Ray supposes this is what passes for happiness in a robotic rat.

He sits on a stool beside the table, illuminated by a ring of glaring halogen light. He's already examined the rat at magnification levels that can only be described as stupid. He's studied its carapace for structural integrity flaws. He's performed manual diagnostics on the three dozen or so servo-motors that pass for joints. He's taken apart all the (supposedly) hermetically sealed sensor boxes and run them through computer mediated test cycles. As of an hour ago, he'd had the rat separated into enough pieces to make a watchmaker wince.

Now the tools are mostly put away, the assorted screws and bolts and cotter pins more or less put back where they came from. Currently, he has the motherboard access panel in the rat's flank open. He touches an electrode stylus against various contact nodes, then scans the single line LCD display for irregular messages. He already knows the crampon problem was a bad electrical relay. He replaced that before he put on the new limbs. Now he's just messing around, performing standard maintenance so he maybe won't have to see this rat again for a hundred thousand kilometers or so.

Despite the fact of their impending separation, he's taken to calling this rat Nomar. Ray has freely admitted to a near pathological obsession with naming his animals Nomar. Four dogs, three cats, eight fish and a lemming at last count. The lemming could be considered heretical, so it was just as well it only survived for a couple of months.

He finishes with his tests at about the same time as the diagnostic server. Ray unscrews the co-ax cable, closes the panel. The rat rolls onto its paws, either obediently or expectantly, Ray can't really tell.

"Up for a test drive, Nomar?"

Nomar rises up on his hind legs, nose-scrunching and paw-wagging, then piles off the table onto Ray's lap. It clutches a rapid descent down his coverall legs and seems to find the replacement limbs reliable enough. Ray follows the rat to the shop door. He cracks it open enough to peer out into the gangway, but doesn't see anyone.

He peers intently at Nomar until he thinks he has the rat's attention. "If Ziggy catches us, we're completely busted, got it? So keep a low profile in the public areas. And try not to look like you're following me, okay?"

We'll shoot up to the Garden Level, then right back down for reconfigure and re-deploy."

But Nomar is ignoring him. He's already got his nose wedged between the door and the frame, snuffling at the air and engaging ambulatory motors in an attempt to squeeze through the gap. Before the rat can chitter its frustration, Ray lets him out and follows at a brisk pace. They make it maybe ten meters.

"Ray!"

He doesn't want to turn around. As a matter of personal policy, turning around seems like a very bad idea...though perhaps not so bad as *not* turning around, because nobody booms his name down a cavernous gangway with that queer mix of menace and psychic exhaustion like Ziggy. And blowing off Ziggy would constitute a career-endingly bad idea.

Ray rotates on his heels and hisses at Nomar to wait for him, then wanders back toward the shop, and toward Ziggy who stands a little way farther down the corridor, just outside the door to his office. Ziggy has struck his standard pose--hands on hips, neck bent slightly so he peers down the bridge of his nose, head swaying back and forth like a pendulum, as though he's already anticipating a need to make refusals.

Zig is a large black man, balding, but compensating in the follicle department with a devastating fu-manchu moustache that turns the entire lower half of his face into a forest of bristling pubic hairs. He's big bellied because Nina, his wife, is one of those rare and wondrous women who can make tofu and protein paste actually resemble something edible. He has the jowls of a bulldog and the temperament to match. The diploma framed on the wall in his office says he's an engineer, but Ray knows that's only technically accurate. Ziggy is a hardware hacker retired to administrative oversight. Ray is the only one who calls him Ziggy. Everyone else refers to him as Section Chief Zighowser.

Face to face, Ziggy continues, "You're not taking that drone abovedecks."

Ray starts to make the *what drone is that?* motion with his hands, but he catches a glint out of the corner of eye. When he tracks it, looks down, there's Nomar up on his hind legs, steadying himself with his paw around a roll of Ray's trouser fabric.

"Traitor," he grouses.

Nomar tugs on his leg and whistles.

Ziggy shakes his head. "Commander Sorensen has been pretty danged clear, I think. To everyone but you, that is."

"There was a memo," Ray agrees.

"And the memo said?"

"Drones are confined to engineering levels, conduits and appropriate task-sensitive decks and zones."

"And?"

"Drones are proprietary Federal Space Agency technology."

"And..."

"They're not to be considered pets, but members of the engineering crew."

"There's something about that you don't understand?"

"I guess not."

Ziggy gives him the nod that says the topic is closed for discussion--a brisk up and down. Like an avalanche viewed in slow motion, he folds his legs beneath him and kneels on the deck where he can drop the full weight of his professional attention on Nomar. The rat lacks the good sense to shy away.

For a number of seconds, Zig probes the new limbs with his fingertips while Nomar applies a diplomatic *quid pro quo* logic in order to inspect the flesh of the Section Chief's arm. A tongue-cognate sensor whip flicks the sweat from Ziggy's palm, saving it for some hideously complicated chemical analysis later.

"This the one from this afternoon?"

It's a pointless question, an icebreaker. There are something like six thousand rats assigned to *Paraclete*, five of which are active at any given time. Shop rumor has it that Ziggy can individually identify each one of them by physical or behavioral characteristics at twenty meters in a gloomy storage bay after having consumed half a bottle of hooch, and still probably give you the drone's correct serial number. Ray answers with the properly noncommittal, "Uh-huh."

"Electromagnetic lock?"

"Relay."

Ziggy nods as though this information is something other than completely useless and projects the impression that he's filed it away somewhere important for later review. "The limbs look good. The drone seems to be integrating the new hardware adequately. Decent coordination of extremities. Sound movement tracking. Solid range of motion."

This is no doubt a sidelong way of suggesting there were methods to test hardware replacements without the necessity of physically wandering all over the ship.

They're called People Skills, Mr. Marlowe! Perhaps you should look into requisitioning a starter set.

Ray only shrugs. "He didn't complain. My boy was a model patient."

Obviously, Ziggy is working up to something he wants to say. Ray is very sensitive to the waffling style of administrative pre-conversational foreplay. It usually means he's done something so mind numbingly stupid or thoughtless that it has attracted the attention of the Powers That Be, who have thundered their displeasure from the Bridge Deck mountaintop into the Sub-Deck valleys via the comm unit on Ziggy's desk, and the Zigster is so worn from the verbal manhandling that he just can't muster the energy to pass it on.

Ziggy says, "You know that HVAC tube we purged was the main coolant pipe for the Bridge."

"Sure. It was right there in the schematics. I took the liberty of informing the galley well in advance that any attempt to serve ice cream for dessert in the officers' mess tonight would probably be a bad idea."

As usual, Ziggy narrows his eyes, trying to guess how much of what he has just said is true. "I won't tell you how pissed off the Commander was."

"Maybe we should write this down. I think it's a notable first."

"Shut up for a minute and listen to me, Ray. I'm trying to tell you that it was good work, regardless of what anyone else might have to say about it. A hard job done nice and quick and by the book. Most of the system vets would have written off the hardware and let it go at that. Don't want to inconvenience the captain, you understand." All along, Ziggy continues his examination of the rat, though to Ray, it looked more like the two of them were playing some arcane version of pat-a-cake. "Do you know why I give you the type of job orders I do, Ray?"

Ray chews his lip thoughtfully, then says, "Because you hate me? Because you know I don't have a permanent berth and need to stay in your good graces if I want a job next time out? Or maybe just because I'm gullible."

He grins widely, but Ziggy only shakes his head.

"It's because you know how to treat the hardware, son. You've got the right priorities and you make the right decisions under pressure. You do your job without any fuss and without screwing around with the politics. The other vets don't seem to see the situation with the correct level of clarity."

"Bunch of pussies." Ray makes sure to crack the smile a bit wider. "Does that mean I can have your job when you quit?"

"I don't think so."

At least they've cleared that up. "Well, thanks for the pep talk, boss. It's good to know I'm appreciated."

Ziggy hauls himself back to his feet, once more the scowling, hand-on-hip administrative juggernaut. He sighs heavily, as though their interaction has taxed the reserves of patience he was only pretending to possess.

"Don't take the rat uplevel."

"Right. Understood."

"I'm telling you."

"I'm listening. Complete focus on my end."

Ziggy rolls his eyes and flips subjects, some rogue neuron in his brain having misfired and convinced him without any evidence or historical proof to the contrary that Ray is actually going to do what he says.

"Nina made some cookies for you."

"Your wife likes me. She thinks I'm hot."

"She thinks you need someone to take care of you so you don't starve."

"As far as women are concerned, that's like the same difference, man."

"You can pick them up when you've logged out for the night. I'll leave them sitting on my desk."

The conversation over, Ziggy wanders back into his office and closes the door so he can maintain the illusion that he's about to be obeyed. Ray watches him go, contemplating the door for several seconds in silence. Nomar gives him only that long before more trouser tugging ensues.

Ray winks at the rat. "Lunch, you say? Sure, let's go."

Chapter Two

The first thing everyone learns about *Paraclete* is that there is no actual, locate-able, stroll through-able, smell-the-flower variety garden on the Garden Level. There are no hydroponic growth vats, no specialized lighting, no actual fauna which might be even vaguely confused with explosions of greenery and/or vegetable caliber edibles. This somewhat flagrant misnomer might be considered an obscene breach of language usage if one neglected to take into account two critical facts: first, that the ship's schematics actually labeled it as Gamma Level, since it happened to fit comfortably between Beta Level and Delta Level; and second, that Gamma Level was the primary repository of paying passengers--folks who either should not be expected to carry a working knowledge of the Greek alphabet in their neural networks, or who considered such a sterile reference system to be vaguely chilling and gauche and hopelessly neo-militaristic. Even in the quasi-federal deep space shipping business, it was important to maintain the illusion that the customer was always right.

No garden, but there was food--from the basic federal protein paste dispenser available to all passengers and crew at no cost, to the private vendors who had leased ship space and paid a tonnage fee for their business stock of supplies. Mr. Wu's Taste of the Orient. Li Nan's Old American Cuisine. The Poultry Hut. An endless succession of franchise burger stands and interstate off-ramp staples. Most of these were permanent berths, as much a part of the *Paraclete* ecosystem as the engineers, officers, soldiers and crew. There were worse business propositions in the galaxy than having six or seven thousand guaranteed customers for six solid months. Check that: six or seven thousand reasonably wealthy customers, given that they could afford passage on a ship of *Paraclete's* class in the first place.

Ray swaps a half hour of Nomar's waste processing acumen for a leftover calzone at Frankie V's Sicilian Connection, an undocumented arrangement Frankie has made with most of the system vets to save on disposal fees. Afterwards, he and Nomar spend an hour following the curve of the main concourse around the forward hull of the ship.

Here, the infrastructure resembles not so much *Paraclete's* primary mission as a military vessel as it does a cheap knock off of a Singapore hotel specializing in upper class business travelers. Lots of comfortable looking couches in muted pastels, one-stop data kiosks, massive jumbotron media feeds beamed directly from satellites and relay beacons from any of the six broadcasting star systems a passenger might have a remote interest in. The public screens are inevitably tuned to financial market reports or stations dedicated to sporting minutiae or the occasional hard core pornography signal when rambunctious teenagers happen to be in the vicinity. Ray supposes this says something revelatory about the nature of the Garden Level clientele.

Given that it's something like 10:00 p.m. Greenwich/Terran, Ray and Nomar have the high ceilings and fashionably carpeted runways of the concourse to themselves. Those passengers who aren't performing their nightly ablutions are ensconced uplevel in the Network Control hub finalizing their instructions for associates and delegates regarding the next day's financial transactions before the batch transmission deadline.

Like most rats, Nomar is taking advantage of the decreased traffic to make an ass of himself. He spends several minutes tracking pheromone trails, following them to locked doors, which he proceeds to sniff beneath and around, then scratch at until Ray hisses at him to stop. Where he finds actual human beings, he can't resist the urge to nuzzle legs and sensor whip the soles of shoes. People are a mélange of scents and excretions, bacteria and exotic chemical processes the rats find endlessly fascinating. Fortunately, Nomar is exotic enough in his own right that the passengers accept his probing with well-mannered smiles--and Nomar responds with a well-mannered willingness to be petted and patted and to preen on command. It is part of his core programming to behave nothing like the rat population of which he is a mechanical simulacrum, but he does a passable job of imitating a moderately intelligent lap dog.

An hour later, when Ray would like to be swinging back toward Frankie V's for a beer or two and maybe a fresh biscotti, they're standing amidships in the Grande Vista Solarium just outside the velvet lined doors of

Madame Trousseau's Galactic Theatre. Ray leans out over the railing where he can observe a two hundred meter scalloped cross-section of the thirty levels above and below. Most of them have been powered down by Environmental Control to simulate late evening, close-of-business-hours inactivity. From this vantage point, if he cranes his neck, he can see all the way up to the plastisheen observation dome that pokes from the ship's outer hull like an opalescent pimple. He doesn't do this anymore, because even at relativistic velocities, the starfield doesn't change enough to be noteworthy.

Nomar has discovered some sort of sensory nirvana here. He skitters back and forth from pheromone trail to chemical signature, his eyes bright and sensor whip dangling greedily from between his jaws. Periodically, he stops and snuffles at a particularly interesting patch of carpet, and attempts to dig out a few fibers for further study or simple, parameter-driven hoarding. He aims an almost constant barrage of chirps and whistles and chattering observations in Ray's direction, to the point that Ray almost feels guilty for not being able to understand and share in his excitement.

The floor in the vicinity of the Madame Trousseau's is vibrating with sonic pressure. Ray can feel the heavy beat of kettledrums rolling up from the deck into his calves. Through the theater doors, he detects the occasional slap of cymbals or the fine, low hum of orchestral strings. After a few minutes, there's silence, then a burst of applause whose thunderous sincerity suggests the performance wasn't a canned holo from the ship's data library. Either that or the Madame was augmenting the response track to provide her customers with the subliminal cue that they'd gotten their monies worth. It would not have been the first time

Moments later, the grand, crimson velvet doors are flung open by a uniformed usher and the exodus of the Beautiful People of the Garden Level begins. Ray just has time to scoop Nomar out of the way before he tears off to promiscuously lick and fondle the cultured, blue-haired biddies on their way to late teas and private suites and upper echelon gossip. He stakes out a patch against the railing, as far from the herd as he can manage, and sets Nomar down so he's out of range of immediate notice. He presses the heel of his boot against Nomar's spinal beam to hold him in place. The rat takes the hint and waits.

"I hope you're not hurting him."

If he worked hard at it, Ray could pretend this comment was directed at someone else. He makes a big show of flicking his eyes back and forth around the concourse, busily examining everything at once and nothing in particular. A man with a rat underfoot could get into some serious trouble for casually interacting with Garden-class passengers.

"Sir?"

But someone is determined not to be ignored, it seems. Ray scans the thinning crowd, spots the woman approaching from two meters away. She is blond, twentyish, with wide blue eyes--incandescent in a green silk shift that shows him the top of her pale breasts and the athletic curves of her legs. She is also smiling at him, that sort of glib and mannered expression only the blindingly attractive and socially adept can carry off.

And she is, in fact, stunning.

"I do hope you're not hurting him," she says again, close to him now.

Ray swallows hard at a sudden dryness in his throat. "Who?"

"Your animal. The one you're standing on."

"He's a drone, ma'am. No pain sensors." To prove it, Ray taps his foot along Nomar's back, producing a dull, metallic clang. Nomar pipes up at him curiously, the way you'd expect a kid to ask what it is you wanted after

you'd tapped him on the shoulder a dozen or so times.

The girl bends toward Nomar to confirm his lack of sensitivity to physical abuse. Given the angle, Ray tries admirably not to look down the front of her dress, fully aware that if he chose to look, he could probably see all the way down to her belly button. Amazing.

Nomar catches a faint tickle of her chemical signature, and lifts his head, sensor whip poised, but only gets off a strangled whistle of interrogation. Ray experiences a horrified vision of Nomar lapping his cognate tongue from her collar bone to solar plexus and applies an extra dose of pressure. Nomar backs off at once. He's not stupid. He knows when he's being advised to activate his best behavior sub-routines.

"He doesn't look very happy," the girl says.

"The rats are curious sorts, and they're really only happy when they're satisfying that urge. Unfortunately, their methods are invasive in a way that most people find pretty aggravating."

She leans back warily, lifting her face toward Ray. "Oh, is he dangerous?"

"No. Just desperately annoying when he wants to be. The truth is, they're pretty much just fancy assed calculators."

With an amused giggle, she rises up again. Her laugh has the quality of tinkling glass. "You're part of the engineering crew, yes?"

"Good guess."

"Are you on duty? You and your pet?"

Ray considers the stained coveralls he's been wearing since his vent expedition. "I suppose I look a little underdressed for the occasion. A night at the theatre, I mean."

"You're actually quite grubby."

"Not to put too fine a point on it, yes."

A flush of embarrassment creeps into her cheeks. "I'm sorry. That would be my foot in my mouth." By way of apology, she adds, "My name is Emma. Emma Whiston."

She extends her hand, knuckles up. Ray isn't certain if he is supposed to kiss it like an actor in a movie, so he settles on a gentle, if awkward squeeze.

"I'm Ray."

"Engineer Ray?"

"Ray the systems vet."

A crease develops in her brow. "Oh, you've been at it a while, then."

"Actually, no--oh, you mean--sorry. Hardware Systems Technician, First Class, ma'am. The geeks--that is to say, the physical engineers--call us veterinarians, because we maintain the rats. Um, the drones. It's an old joke."

"That's clever." She says it in a way that makes him actually believe her. "Do you have a last name, Ray?"

"Marlowe. With an 'e'."

"Like the playwright."

"More like the detective."

"How intriguing! And are you hard-boiled, Mr. Marlowe?"

"More than I am likely to be making deals with the devil, ma'am."

Again with the precocious spill of laughter. The girl's eyes seem wider than ever, her pupils perfect circles the color of glacial ice. "Would you and your friend like to take me out for a drink, Ray? I'd like you to ask me."

She moves into his space, and he can smell her skin, a scent like cinnamon and expensive soap. Ray swallows hard against a sudden constriction of his throat. "Nice girls don't usually go out in public with a rat."

"Whoever said I was a nice girl?"

Her grin is enticing, wicked, reminds him that he could have sworn he'd just said he didn't make deals with devils.

"I'm not really in a position..." he starts lamely. This is considerably too fast for his taste. He thinks she might be flirting with him, toying with him, but he can't be certain. Unless nudity is involved, Ray's sensitivity to flirtation in general is dreadfully inadequate. "I mean, I'm on duty until 6:00 Greenwich. I'm sorry."

And he is. Truly. Deeply.

But she dismisses him with a flick of her head, what amounts to an effete shrug. "I guess it wasn't meant to be."

Emma Whiston glances back over her shoulder, and Ray notices for the first time the man leaning against the wall by the theater doors. Dark haired, brooding, thin and rangy and cataclysmically poetic, like a walking impersonation of Percy Shelley. He is smoking a cigarette, assuming a casual pose, but the knotted muscles of his jaw and the almost frenetic way he flips his ashes into the can suggest a titanic effort to hide his impatience.

Oops, Ray thinks, and discovers that he absolutely, viscerally hates this guy. Hates him.

Emma winks at him. "My handler is waiting. My brother, that is. You were this close to saving me from him. Some hero you turned out to be."

"Next time I'll be sure to pack my shining armor."

But she arches an eyebrow. "What would possibly make you think there will be a next time?"

I'd like there to be a next time. Thinks it, but doesn't say it. He knows better. Who is this woman?

Like that, she spins away from him and is gone without another word, leaving her escort to chase after her.

And Ray to watch her until she disappears around the curve of the concourse. To Nomar, he says: "I hope you

got that, buddy, because I'm fairly certain it went straight over my head."

Nomar chitters a response that sounds something like commiseration.

Unfortunately, misapprehension of the precise agenda Ms. Emma Whiston might have had in mind is the least of his problems.

Because suddenly, there is Commander Sorensen in Madame Trousseau's doorway. *Paraclete's* captain has just said something witty to the usher, or at least something the usher determined was best accepted as a witticism, because he's giving up one of those polite laughs meant to indicate that he'd be happier if everyone just left him alone.

Sorensen is flanked by his First Mate and Security Chief, all three of them stiff and formally resplendent in blue dress uniforms. The captain dresses this way whenever he descends below the Bridge Deck, as though he's afraid no one will recognize him if he's out of uniform. Or more probably, that some low level wiseass will be tempted to ignore his direct orders if there isn't a chestload of brass and medals and epaulets to back them up.

Chief Becker makes brief eye contact with Ray, then immediately engages in an obvious attempt to steer *Paraclete's* captain away, going so far as to place his hand on the senior officer's arm. But it's too late. Sorensen spots Ray, spots Nomar, and flares from jovial ship's host to deranged extrasolar mariner in a space of time so brief it can only be measured in wavelengths of light. His cheeks blossom an ugly shade of crimson. He is, Ray observes, actually trembling with fury. This is amusing only in the most abstract of senses.

"Marlowe!" Sorensen barks, not even bothering to cross the concourse before the verbal undressing begins.

Ray jumps to attention and offers a salute that quite possibly qualifies as the worst in documented military history. As if that matters at this point.

Sorensen's glare is piercing. It rolls up from the rat beneath his boot, takes in the grime streaked coveralls and Ray's general hygienic neglect, up and up to Ray's unkempt hair, lack of crewman's badge, etc., etc. Just behind his eyes Ray can almost see a scrolling list of the precise ship's policy directives, verbal or written orders and maritime codes of conduct he has violated by his mere appearance. He does his best not to wilt, but it's really just a matter of waiting for the explosion.

"That's your drone, I assume, mister?"

Sorensen wants him to deny it, to come up with some plausible excuse for having defied a direct order. It's obvious from his tone. Something along the lines of: *No, nope, not at all. I was just retrieving this one for maintenance. Bad bit of navigational code and all that.* But Ray just isn't up to it.

"I was field testing the equipment."

It takes a visible effort for Sorensen to keep from dumping about a liter of accelerant on his already dangerously short fuse. "You'll meet me in my Ready Room, Mr. Marlowe--in five minutes. That should give you just enough time to do something with that drone so I don't have to see it on or about your person ever again. Are we clear?"

"Yes."

Seething, chest expanding. "Yes?"

Ray gets the hint, nods. "Yes, sir."

"If you're not there in five minutes, I'll dispatch Chief Becker to track you down--with shackles in hand. Is *that* understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Sorensen stalks off like a man reciting the combination on his gun safe, dragging his lieutenants behind him.

Ray watches him go, thinking: *Rats*.

He locks Nomar in the shop where (theoretically) he'll manage to stay out of trouble, then catches the nearest speed lift up to the bridge. The command module is an unattractive bulge on the outer skin of what happens to be a bulbous, unattractive ship. *Paraclete* resembles a battle scarred narwhal more than the sleek and sexy rockets people generally associated with space craft. Casual observers tend to agree that it has lumps in all the wrong places, ridges where there should be planes. It's like a high school kid's first experiments with a battered old jalopy and an industrial sized bucket of bondo.

It is a starship straight from the twisted and lumbering imagination of Bosch.

This is perhaps not surprising given that *Paraclete* is not designed to slice a clean and brilliant swath through relativistic space, but to trundle along its shipping lanes, to creep into its secret places, to establish contact with hostile elements it might find there and blast the spunky bits out of them. In that light, *Paraclete* has also been styled as the most secure passenger liner in the history of human transport.

Ray exits the lift doors and takes a left hand turn away from the main bridge. Here there's a small corridor, at the end of which is a door that he enters without bothering to knock. Becker is there, holding the door ajar as if he was just about to leave. He spots Ray and gives him a look that might be relief. Or it might be more akin to a *you are such a tool* sentiment. Becker has one of those inscrutable faces that can be difficult to read.

Ray brushes past him and into the captain's ready room. He likes it here. Sorensen is a man of refined taste, who knows how to walk the line between spartan and elegant. There's a polished mahogany table with comfortable cloth chairs in the center of the room. The opposite wall is a single sheet of industrial plastisheen, stronger than flexsteel, but completely transparent. The star field beyond creates a sobering backdrop, transmits a sense of transience and insignificance to the observer that is no doubt purposeful. To the left is Sorensen's massive antique desk, skillfully modified to contain the latest model data terminal. Behind, there's an expansive wet bar mounted by a wide mirror, so Sorensen can mix drinks for his guests without having to break eye contact.

Ray does not expect the captain to offer him a drink.

Sorensen sits at the conference table rather than behind his desk, which might have seemed significant if Ray wasn't expecting it. He doesn't acknowledge Ray's arrival, but Becker is there with his hand on Ray's shoulder, guiding him into the nearest chair--which happens, probably not by chance, to be opposite the captain.

Ray realizes the lack of greeting isn't Sorensen's brusque attempt at a slight. He's peering not at the table, but through a clouded glass window at a recessed terminal screen. Every few moments, the ridges of his brow contract as he views something of interest, or perhaps something which troubles him. These things may or may not have anything to do with Ray. Commanding a starship between ports of call is a taxing and time intensive business under the best of circumstances, even when one doesn't have some low-level muckaluck

lugubriously defying your direct orders.

Finally, the captain snorts and raises his eyes. He fixes Ray with a glare that is both fierce and unhappy.

"Why are you such a pain in my ass, Marlowe?" There's an uncomfortable pause during which Ray tries to decide if the question was rhetorical. Sorensen grunts, pretending to remember his manners now that he's gotten to say what was really on his mind. "Do you want a drink? I want a drink."

Ray accepts with a nod. Immediately, Becker is up and crossing over to the bar. "Scotch, straight and vodka with lime. I got it."

Sorensen murmurs his thanks, then turns his full attention back to Ray. "You're starting to make me look bad in front of the crew. When you flout my direct orders, people expect me to do something about it. When I don't seem to do anything, they want to know why. Discipline is all that holds a ship together, and you're eroding my authority to enforce that discipline."

"I'm not the one who issued a questionable policy memo in a fit of pique," Ray says flatly.

On cue, Sorensen starts to rub his temples in small but intense clockwise revolutions. He might as well have been saying, what did I do to deserve this?

Ray gives him a thin smile that surrenders exactly no terrain in this ongoing argument. "I've done my best to maintain the appearance of compliance, Commander, and at some expenditure of personal effort, I might add. Entire systems had to be rerouted and drones manually recoded. I'm three days and a dozen terabytes of data behind in terms of analysis. There's a whole litany of changes I've enacted and schedules I've thrown off for your sake if you want to hear the gory details of it."

"Thank you, no. I want to be kept in the dark as much as possible. "

But Ray presses him. "Unfortunately, some excursions are still unavoidable. I've got to have the coverage."

Sorensen waves off his explanations. "You're right. I'm sorry. It was a childish gesture."

"I understand. These aren't the optimum conditions for any of us."

"I don't want this spook operation taking over my ship," he snaps back, but it was too weak to be offensive. Six months of snapping that had proven pointless had worn most of the real protest out of him. By this late in the game, Sorensen's crankiness is barely a shadow of its previous substance. "I'm a cranky old bastard, Mr. Marlowe. I've earned the right to be that way, frankly. It rankles me to have the FSA plant a civilian investigator on my vessel--a civilian with orders that supersede *Paraclete's* primary mission. So, when I say that you are a pain in my ass, sir, you understand that I mean no personal offense, even if you do happen to be the worst crewman ever to wear the uniform."

"Commander, I do believe you're trying to flatter me. Shameless, but effective."

Becker returns bearing a tray with two glasses. Sorensen can only grin and shake his head in a way that makes it clear this last speech amounted to nothing more than lodging his official complaint of the situation once again for the ship's crypto-locked data core--as if he hadn't already done it dozens of times. Redundancy never hurt anybody. He grabs the tumbler offered to him almost greedily and immediately shoots half of the scotch in one swallow. He grunts with distinct pleasure as it goes down, and the grin is larger and more sincere when he is done.

In turn, Ray sips his vodka and allows the interruption to help them shift gears. He marks that Becker hasn't mixed anything for himself. The Chief is a vocal and infamous teetotaler. He is also, Ray knows, a recovering alcoholic trying to salvage some respectability out of his career on what is most likely his last tour of duty.

Sorensen is likeable enough. Tall and broad shouldered, well into his forties, but fit enough to whip a man half his age. His blond hair is neither thinning nor showing signs of tending toward gray. He is, in short, a Viking cliché--all the way down to his fiery temper and questionable impulse control. He is also a brilliant naval tactician and has won enough battle citations that the shipping freight from Terra to deliver his medals alone would have bankrupted a small country. He has also been, at least in Ray's estimation, a model of restraint given the duress the FSA had placed him under. Everything he said was true, or accurate enough that Ray sometimes wishes he could do a better job of playing the disciplined crewman's role. Unfortunately, it just isn't in him. Couldn't muster the energy for it if he had to. Somewhere in his personnel file, buried in a sealed vault deep underground beneath a federal agency that probably didn't officially exist, he was fairly certain his psych profile contained the words "does not work well in team settings".

And that was fine with him. He isn't playing a team game.

His glass drained, Sorensen slaps it against the tabletop like a man summoning his resolve. "Now that we've got the preliminaries out of the way..."

"Shop," Ray finishes his thought. "Let's talk shop."

He pauses a few moments to give Becker a chance to retreat to the captain's desk and disable the data core's automatic recording system.

After a few moments, Becker says, "Go ahead."

"I looked into the shipping inconsistencies you uncovered from the cargo manifest. I would tend to agree that one or more of your passenger cliques did indeed smuggle contraband of some sort on board. I've had the drones scouring the storage bays for indications of explosive or armament residue, but that search has come up empty at this point. My suspicion is that any smuggling was of a mundane nature--valuables, precious metals, items that can be exchanged for currency--that these folks elected not to add to their customs declarations. Becker can follow up on that."

Sorensen flaps his hand impatiently. "Bah. We'll assume they bought off the freight companies rather than *Paraclete's* people. I don't need to cause a row this close to port."

"That works for me," Ray agrees. "I'd prefer to avoid any actions that would generate hostility between the passengers and the crew at this point. I'm mostly certain I can confirm the identities of the entire passenger manifest, minus a few of your more reclusive guests. I've got positive pheromone matches for all the early suspects, and their chem signatures appear to match with the samples logged in the boarding check files. The software hacks we discussed a few weeks ago to make the drones behave less offensively seem to have alleviated potential clashes with outraged guests, either that or they've just abandoned hopes of being left alone. If anything, I may have erred on the side of cuteness since I seem to be missing three drones at the moment." Ray shrugs off the lost assets to show that he sees nothing nefarious in their disappearance. "What can I say, kids seem to have a thing for rats."

Sorensen seems to worry less about the missing drones than the implications of his survey. "But that means the passengers are all who they appear to be--and who they say they are. What does that leave us? One of the franchises?"

Ray shakes his head, frowning. "Security Chief Becker's background checks and pre-boarding examinations

were more than thorough, Commander. If Lilaiken extremists have infiltrated this vessel, it wasn't via that channel."

"That isn't to say they're all doing business strictly above board," Becker says carefully. "Just that it's something other than weapons they're peddling on the side."

Sorensen scowls, indicating he has no current interest in pursuing those topics. "So we've cleared the passengers and the imported labor. God knows we've cleared the crew. What does that leave?" Here, the scowl deepens, mostly in Ray's direction. "What does that leave except bad intelligence, Mr. Marlowe? Other than a completely unwarranted load of aggravation your presence has bid me to endure for the last six months?"

"What I'm saying is that the identities of the passengers have been confirmed. That does not rule out the possibility of sleeper agents or Lilaiken sympathizers awaiting instructions from terrorist controls. It is terribly complex system, trying to keep track of so many people, trying to keep profile databases spread out over dozens of worlds and billions of people and the latest intelligence from a score of covert service branches in any way in some form of coherence, especially while attempting to maintain the illusion that basic privacy rights still exist. I won't be fully satisfied that we've avoided hostile Lilaiken action until we're back in Terran solar space. But, given the preliminary data, I would think, captain, that you'd be happy to know your vessel was not one that may have been infiltrated."

Sorensen mutters something Ray doesn't hear, insulted. "You'd think wrong, then. What that means is that it isn't *Paraclete* this time, on this run. Which means it might be us the next time, or the time after that, or as soon as we've ceased to pay as careful attention as we ought to be. I won't be happy until we've tracked down the last of these criminals and marooned them on an asteroid pointed at the sun."

"Understood, sir. And I appreciate it, believe me." Both the sentiment, in fact, and the subtle expression of the same outrage felt by most captains throughout the deep space fleet.

For almost three years, radical Lilaiken separatists had been abusing the shipping lanes between Alamai Plantation and the frontier colonies, fomenting insurrection against the rule of the Federal Space Administration and the military apparatus in general. Most of their activities took the form of munitions transfers to amenable elements on backwater planets like Frejdan, Orduvai and Sheridan Minor. These had essentially reduced those colonies to a succession of armed camps divided between federally controlled mining stations and outlying tenement villages both more occupied with sniping forays than long term settlement.

Over the last year, a splinter group within the Lilaiken movement had taken the struggle to a new level, content not only with using the space administration's fleet as unconscious ferrymen, but determined to escalate the burgeoning hostilities from a series of border police actions to outright war between the inner and outer worlds. Beginning last May, over a span of six months, three Goliath class military transports--*Hegemony*, *Asp* and *Gorgon*--had exploded without apparent cause after scheduled shipping drops to the frontier systems, at a cost of eighteen thousand hands and an additional nine thousand passengers.

Enough was known about the Lilaiken extremist movement and its leadership to establish a preliminary list of suspects, but details were scarce beyond that. The group's cell structure had proved largely impenetrable and reasonably waterproof. The mechanism of destruction that had been leveled against the Goliath ships was still unknown, and it was the sheer dearth of facts that rendered the attacks chillingly personal to men like Sorensen. To be driven like a mule, like some petty, third world rebel's bitch, was bad enough--to implode in the frozen vacuum of space as someone else's political message was worse, unconscionable.

And as *Paraclete* decelerated toward New Holyoke now--the absolute frontier of frontier space, Ray feels the

pressure of being absolutely certain he hasn't missed anything that would imperil the ship. With so little being known about this new breed of Lilaikens, the potential for error was unacceptably high. Almost as lofty as the consequences of failure.

Ray continues, "You should also be aware that your Van Nuys reactor emissions are clean. The disaster reconstruction team shared with myself and my counterparts on the *Everpresent* and the *Layla Shy* the current hypothesis that the outworld space events all indicated some form of radical reactor failure. Since they felt like they could rule out any sort of explosive device, they're working with the assumption that destabilizing isotopes were introduced to the core by some at this point unknown vector. I can't send a drone into the core itself, obviously, but I did loose one in the venting chute to see what might come bubbling up. That particular experiment has been prematurely curtailed by some unforeseen mechanical difficulties, but I gathered enough raw data to issue you a clean bill of health."

"Your little experiment cost the FSA about a billion dollars in overheated electronics hardware, Mr. Marlowe."

Shrugging, Ray responds, "When I became aware of the malfunction, I had to initiate retrieval immediately. I couldn't run the risk that another technician would be assigned to the task. Chief Zighowser is a savvy enough hardware hacker to recognize that someone had been tampering with the drone."

Sorensen smiles thinly. "Just remember how vital that risk was when the FSA presents your agency with the bill."

"As the updates come in, I'll probably have to repeat the experiment--in the event that the isotope list changes."

"I understand, though I'll appreciate a concerted effort to avoid a reprise of today's events."

"Certainly."

The captain nods his approval. "We'll arrange another meeting next week, hopefully under circumstances that don't require me to convince my First Mate that I've had to bust your ass yet again. Unless you've got something else to add, that is."

But Ray is finished, and he says so. Under normal circumstances, he could have expected Sorensen to reciprocate with the latest military intelligence that might have a bearing on his investigation, but Commander Sorensen generally delegated those duties to Becker, who had the freedom of movement to contact Ray in a timely and inconspicuous fashion as the need arose.

Sorensen climbs out of his chair. "Consider me placated once again, Mr. Marlowe. Please have the courtesy to remember to appear contrite on your way out."

Ray typically spends what he considers to be an inordinate amount of time trying not to freak out. In spite of any personal admiration he might feel for Commander Sorensen, this is part of the reason he dreads their one-on-two little confabs. Sorensen never fails to leave him feeling as though he's a slipshod revelation from jumping right out of his skin.

Why? Because Ray is not a spook. Not now, never has been. That Sorensen takes his spook-ability for granted is ethically problematic. It has led over time to a troubling divergence of understanding. It has created a webwork of assumptions and inconsistencies. Basic ones, like the unstated belief that even his name, Ray

Marlowe, is a legend, a fabrication, a secure identity created solely for the job. Things like this freak Ray out to no end--partially because it makes him uncomfortable to maintain a blatant façade with an officer of Sorensen's magnitude, partially because it rails against every value with which he has been inculcated. But mostly because he worries that Sorensen thinks of him as a wild card, as a shadow without substance. A man with an agenda outside of and possibly contrary to the mission given to *Paraclete*.

Consequently, everything Ray says becomes subject to doubt. If Sorensen can't believe even that Ray is who he says he is, he cannot be legitimately expected to take his reports at face value. And doubt is the singularity in which truth perishes.

Everything else spins off like a spider's web from that that axis.

Frex, contrary to Commander Sorensen's esteemed opinion Ray is not a civilian, though he has no definite rank and does not appear in the published or internal records of military hierarchy. He has, in fact, been a Marine, may still be a Marine actually. He's a little fuzzy on the details of his discharge or lack thereof himself--but as long as the numbers in his bank account change on a semi-regular basis, he doesn't ask and doesn't particularly care. What he does now is better than dodging Russoturk depleted uranium bullets and humping back and forth over sand dunes in the New Mesopotamian Emirate, which is exactly what he was doing prior to masquerading as an alphabet intelligence agency spy.

The truth is that he works for the FSA just like Sorensen and the rest of *Paraclete's* crew. They're Exploration and Enforcement Division, and he's Criminal Investigations Unit. The critical difference between these two departments is that everyone has heard of the EED because it governs much of the intergalactic migration policy and economic development interests on authority practically derived from its possession of a copious number of thirty inch matter cannons and legally supported by a Terran Congressional Forum mandate that is almost nine decades old. The CIU on the other hand, nobody has heard of. Few people even have an inkling that such a department exists. The names of all the FSA officials who can put an acronym to it and identify the individuals assigned to it would fit in one column on one side of a sheet of notebook paper.

But they're the top names. Names that are preceded by titles like Admiral, Mr. Director and Commander-in-Chief.

What this means is that Ray could run around all day long telling people he was a CIU operative and nothing would happen, except maybe his getting tossed into psychiatric restraints for being a blithering idiot. (It also meant that if he found himself in neck-deep you-name-it peril, he could holler all he wanted that he was CIU and expect no kind of help at all. This was another one of those bits that tended to leave him feeling freaked out. If deception wasn't the name of the game, then it must be improvisation.)

It has occurred to him before that the whole concept of the CIU might be a fabrication constructed solely for his benefit. He's never been to the CIU complex, doesn't have an office or even a desk there that he's aware of. Could not, in fact, actually find it if ordered to report there. It is reasonable to assume that a branch of the service as decentralized and schizophrenically paranoid as the CIU doesn't even have an office or a support staff or a human resources department or employees that perform any of the mundane tasks which occupy ninety-five percent of most federal departments. Ray thinks it's probably even reasonable to assume that the CIU borrows EED support staff to fill these needs, then either drugs them into a brain twisting stupor so they don't remember having done it, or simply dispatches them outright and arranges to have the bodies jettisoned into unlikely corners of international space.

The fact that he is kept in fairly regular work on one operation or another forces him to assume that someone with a large head and high IQ and color coordinated pocket protectors sits around creating potential logistical nightmares of secrecy and intrigue just to get him his orders. He has no idea how they cut through the massive wall of bureaucratic stupidity to get him placed on a starship, but it probably involves hostages, exchanges of

gunfire and gaggles of widows manufactured solely for his benefit.

The EED does all the headline inciting things that keep a far flung human society functioning with some modicum of order and civility. The CIU does all the things they can't. Like tracking down Lilaiken terrorists in an extremely low profile way and denying them the benefit of a fair trial. Like investigating rogue starship captains and arranging retirement settlements that won't damage the EED's or the FSA's reputation in such a way that it would destabilize governments. Ray and his cohorts are the guys they send after you when they don't want you to know you're being pursued until after you're already dead.

The fact that they frequently do spooky types of things is completely incidental.

Chapter Three

He wakes from dreams of sand with the taste of cordite in his mouth. He dodges a last couple of Russoturk tracers fired at his head as he peeks over the ragged lip of a wind-carved canyon, rolls to his right and plummets off the side of his bed. His head strikes the corner or the end table as he goes down, there is a burst of stars like detonating howitzer shells, and from the chiaroscuro glare of the eruption inside his skull, he's pinpointed by a red-glimmering pair of infrared enhanced sniper's goggles that turn out to be Nomar watching his antics from across the room. Chittering apologies, Nomar bounces down from the top of Ray's desk and lashes his sensor whip none too gently across the gash with which Ray has impressed his forehead.

Ray remains where he is for some time, canoodling, pressing his palms flat against his temples as if that will contain the throbbing. His blood streams backward into his hair, runs into his ears. It drips off his earlobes and strikes the deck with a fearsomely regular pfft, pfft, pfft that suggests he should probably seek some sort of medical attention.

"Medic!" he mutters with much less intensity than he should. It doesn't matter. Whisper or roar, the medics never come. Medics are for men in the regular infantry, for salving wounds inflicted during the charges of heroic light brigades. In his case, medics come only to collect dog tags and incriminating papers and highly classified field weapons that the government doesn't want to let fall into the hands of the enemy. This is completely beside the fact that any man who screams for a medic on the battlefield runs a 2:1 chance of attracting a *coup de grace* opening of the third eye from a Russoturk crawler rather than the expected course of triage, air evac to Wadi E'lukar, pretty and dark eyed Israeli nurses for two months, then the long, slow flight home to a hero's welcome and celebratory rural American barbecue.

Ray has seen Tac Sergeant McCoy, his gut wounds spurting an eye-popping geyser of blood, advise a field of corpses: *Just rub some sand on it, it'll be fine.* Just rub some sand on it. The same way Ray's coach in pony league baseball might have extolled the medicinal value of infield dirt. On a muggy Indiana summer night, infield dirt was a panacea for dings on the wrist, bruises on cheeks and lips swollen from the impact of a baseball's bad bounce--all of which came frequently off the rain-cratered community ball diamond. *Rub some dirt on it, Ray! Heart of their lineup's due, boy! Quit whining and get back to third base before your momma sees you crying!*

McCoy would've been a great baseball coach. If he hadn't been dead, of course. McCoy and Lance Corporal Lilly and Lieutenant (Hoo-ah!) Wendell Cain and--

Screw it. He's not going to go there today.

It's just after six Greenwich. Ray figures that's as good a time to get up as any. Lying here certainly isn't doing him any good. He locates some disinfectant cream and a tube of flesh toned dermaplast bandage paste in his night stand, then wanders into the head. He scrubs the wound on his forehead with cold water.

The rills and crimson contrails generated by his seeping blood look uncannily like the flowing, graceful Arabic script he used to see on posters in Tehran and Baghdad, or the exquisite handwriting of lower level Kurd functionaries on border documents. This had always impressed him mightily, this overt attention to the written word. Long after the Western world had replaced it's blocky and obtuse written characters with blocky and obtuse typographical characters (and ultimately, blocky and obtuse pixel patterns on terminal screens), the Arabs held fast to sentences that flowed like sweet water across a cream colored page. Every document was a work of art, every writer an Irish monk laboring over a perfect folio of sacred text. Because he had never bothered to learn Arabic, Ray had wondered if it was beautiful to him because he could not read it, or in spite of it. Words outside the context of meaning, like a Tibetan Buddhist's mandala. Words as objects rather than memes, where content was determined by the eye of the beholder rather than the intent of the artist, the communicator.

In February, what, four years ago, he and Corporal Isaac Rabin, a Brooklyn Jew--and a fellow Red Sox fan, who by his very loyalty proved he knew something about Diasporic existential isolation--spent a weekender pass in Djubruk, Chechnya. The Las Vegas of the Steppes as it was styled, despite the fact that it was ringed by mountains and hundreds of kilometers from any actual steppe-like geography but marketed as such because Westerners, particularly Americans, controlled all the money and bore only a passing familiarity with world geography. (And because Asians and to a lesser extent Eastern Europeans still considered the steppe cultures of Attila and the grand Khans to be vaguely, mythically romantic, and assumed the nuances would be universal rather than merely region specific. By their reckoning, it was a set of legends that was at least as compelling as those of the American Old West. This estimation turned out to be so accurate and to hold so much worldwide appeal that it took nothing less than the eruption of the New Mesopotamian Conflict to save Djubruk and its heavily Chinese investors from an inevitable and squalid decline into disaster.)

But in those days, Ray and Isaac had stumbled into what was still a thriving frontier metropolis of neon casinos, front-window strip joints, sickly sweet opium dens and Third World slave brothels. The type of place where fourteen year old sino-afghani whores unzipped your trousers without asking, began sucking your tool right in the middle of the street, then demanded reasonable compensation by way of the universal language--that is, a rusty spike pressed against the tender lump of your scrotum. All the fun and feckless abandon a soldier could ask for, all priced under a dollar...which happened to be Djubruk's unofficial civic motto.

Anyway, the bright eyed kid sister of one of those miserable street whores had sold Ray a crayon and chalk family rendering for the exorbitant price of sixty-three cents American. Wonderful blues and greens and ubiquitous camel-browns. In the forefront was cock-sucking older sister fellating a stick figure with a prodigious bulge of manhood--sans tetanus inducing spike to generate the illusion of libidinous consent. Smaller, to the left, Ahkira herself in idealized yellow satin pinafore, dark haired and grinning with her one working eye wide in cyclopean wonder and contentment. (Ray is able to recognize all the family members because Ahkira had subtly identified them with names and slender, accusatory arrows pointing. The fellated individual was anonymous, but Ray supposed it was meant to be him, kind of like the memento photographs you could buy from the camera-wielding barbarians manning steel-reinforced bunker kiosks in U.S. amusement parks). Elevated, but clearly behind Ahkira's sister is the blackened gorgon lump of B'hutuc, resplendent with jagged silver knives, a menacing shadow cast across the domestic tableau. Much less threatening presented here than it would have been having his actual flesh and blood present to oversee the sexual activity with the toothy smile of a midnight horror and the self-interest of a Djubruk pimp.

Ray has kept this picture. It's in a locker in a lease-by-the-month storage depot outside Indianapolis currently, sealed in vacuum plastic to keep the mice out of it. It is one of his few prized possessions, because when he thinks of it, what he envisions isn't Ahkira's turgid world, but the clean and spidery track of her script, the names and arrows. Things of beauty in a world utterly and pathetically wrong, words outside the context of meaning.

This, of course, makes him think of things that are not nearly so pleasant as slave whores and their handicapped siblings, so he finishes up quickly, trying not to examine his features in the mirror as he does so lest darker revelations be found lurking in the bruised pillows beneath his eyes or sprouting like poppies amongst his nose hairs or peeping like prairie dogs from the cavernous pores on the tip of his nose. A man's body should not become a personal metaphor system for a catalog of bad memories.

Since he has almost six hours before he goes on duty and a starship traveling through the vacuum of space has no regular business hours, Ray decides that it is not insanely early to think about breakfast. He stops in his room to change into khaki cargo pants and a button up civvy style shirt, then whistles for Nomar to follow. By this time, Nomar has lapped up his spilled blood, added the matrix of Ray's DNA to a cross-referenced internal database, subjected the proteins to a shocking number of enzymes and stored the residual matter in his internal tank (since Ray's room, unlike waste bins and storage vaults, doesn't have a standard sewage flume).

Nomar streaks past him into the corridor, then prances impatiently, his iridium-alloy paws ticking against the deckplate like hailstones, while Ray secures the door.

After a fairly heated discussion, they manage to more or less agree that they're both in the mood for something Thai. Thai trash is always a rat favorite, for reasons Ray has never been able to fathom, especially given that Ng Uk-Thong, the Thai franchisee on *Paraclete*, steadfastly refuses to strike a food-for-labor deal with the system vets. Uk-Thong is probably aware of his favored-nation status among the rat leadership and sees no reason to make compromises with mere carbon-form emissaries. That, or the fact that it is a staple of Thai culture and subsequently its cuisine to believe that anything worth using once is worth recycling for someone else, which is both an example of cost-controlling efficiency and striking cosmopolitanism. As most inexperienced cooks know, a good food processor covers a multitude of culinary sins. The "chefs" at Uk-Thong's Bangkok House knew it, and they generated very little raw waste as a result.

Ray and Nomar skitter up to the Garden Level, taking advantage of the early hour and the light pedestrian traffic to grab one of the public lifts. Six months out of the hub-city dock at Stratiskaya Daransk, the business travelers have finally accepted the cold fact that regardless of what the financial markets might be doing, Commander Sorensen isn't going to let them use the broadcast array to triple or quintuple their fortunes until late in the evening. After some initial whining, they've adjusted their internal clocks. Now they rise late, plotting their fiscal strategies in the languid hours between noon and six, laying about in their bedclothes until it's time to assemble in the queue outside the Network Control hub just off the auxiliary communications bridge. They send their wives to theatres and delicately powdered trysts; shoo their kids out to find mischief or personal drugs of choice on the main concourse; drink themselves into a toxic stupor and pass out at their desks, and in the end, it isn't so much unlike the life they had planetside, just skeltered a few hours.

So at this hour, they encounter mostly children on the prowl for entertainment and crewmen bustling about in the course of their duties. The children range from barely toddling to grim teenagers. They wander the decks in cliques like street gangs transplanted from Buenos Aires' urban sprawl--angry, bored, chasing after mischief that will most likely end in violence. The fact that they are mostly effete, lily-skinned poshes doesn't seem to occur to them. At the lowest passenger level, Ray picks up a boisterous tailing of eight year olds, boys and girls, who had been occupied in attempting to disassemble one of the public data kiosks. They are as incorrigible as a tumble of puppies and won't leave him alone until Nomar has been poked and examined to their satisfaction and subjected to the sort of invasive curiosity that is second nature to a rat, and would probably have done Nomar proud if he hadn't been its unwilling recipient. When he neither fetches nor jiggers about chasing his tail, the children lose interest and let them pass without further molestation.

Bangkok House is nearly deserted when they arrive. Ng Uk-Thong's dowdy Brazilian wife, Maria Concita, mans the service counter alone, wrapped in roughly half a kilometer's worth of floral print sarong and *still* displaying a length of cleavage that could probably be detected with satellite reconnaissance photography. Business is slow enough that she doesn't bother to heave her considerable bulk up from the stool behind the cash register, even in order to engage in her legendary hostile and howling management style at the assorted pot clanging/dish dropping /carefully orchestrated chaos that pours forth from the depths of the kitchen area.

Ray blurts out an order for a bland *pad kee mao* with tofu and a side of plain jasmine rice in between her outbursts of neo-Mexicali pidgin obscenity. ("What was that you wanted?" *I have a customer! Hold your tongue, you goat molesting son of pig!* "That is the *pad kee mao*, you say, sir?" *Dent another pot, you discharge of an infected mule's penis, and Gucho will cut your throat with his box knife! I swear it will be so!* "Oh, the chicken is so much nicer! Fresh from the flash freeze unit this morning, mister!" *You talk of my large ass! I will show you my lesion encrusted, puss-filled diarrheal ass when I stick your head in it!* And so on.) Because it is early in the morning, and Ray is both a member of the crew and known to Maria Concita as a customer, she is making a quite an impressive show of restraint. The fact that Ng has learned to keep her away from the knives also helps.

The stir fried noodles and rice arrive in wide crockery bowls decorated with Thai characters but manufactured in an old Irish factory in Queens. Ray retreats with Nomar to the far corner of the Bangkok House's open air food court, which is separated from the main concourse by a low wall topped with plastic ferns. A few moments later, Maria Concita abandons her station with a frightening leap and thunderous landing that Ray is certain must have shoved *Paraclete* three degrees off course. She vanishes into the galley, from which a fresh gale of curses and some indiscriminate screaming noises emerge. Then a clatter. Then silence.

This is why Ray always gets the tofu. Never the chicken. Definitely not ever the beef. Never ever, not with what he knows about the latest advances in industrial food processing technology.

Ray stares intensely at his bowl, then out over the nearly empty concourse, determined to notice nothing. Nomar claws his way onto the tabletop and displays a passing interest in the jasmine rice, but mostly picks the cubes of tofu out from among Ray's forest of noodles.

They eat for several minutes in this disturbing silence while Ray internally debates the wisdom of slinking away before Ng's wife can return.

He becomes aware of a shadow hanging over him and glances up sharply, anticipating Maria Concita Uk-Thong wielding a frying pan or a stainless steel wok the diameter of Mount Fuji, determined to leave no witnesses. But it is not Frau Uk-Thong, and the dissonance leaves him dazed, his jaw hanging.

Emma Whiston peers down at him, her eyes squeezed into slits, her hands clasped behind her back. She burrows into him with the intensity of a woodland sprite attacking a man who has inadvertently violated a fairy ring.

"Mr. Marlowe," she says, "if I didn't know better, I'd say you were stalking me. I may very well have to report you to your captain for my own protection."

Ray swallows an asphyxiation inducing lump of noodles and undercooked vegetables. He remembers to close his mouth after a suitably embarrassing pause. Recognizing Emma's chemical signature, Nomar climbs onto his hind legs and does his best to attract her attention with a frantic forepaw wave--eager, no doubt, for another taste of her. This happens to be something he and Ray have in common, but only because Ray has a documented a weakness for young women in tight cream blouses and short plaid skirts. It's an old parochial school hang-up.

"I believe I was actually here first, Miss--"

"As if you've forgotten my name already!" She makes a delightful show of foot tapping impatience.

"Emma."

He surprises himself by winking as he says her name.

"I suppose that's better than nothing. Not exactly proper, mind you, but it shows you have at least half a brain in your head."

"Do you always insult acquaintances in public restaurants, Miss Whiston?"

"Most always, when it doesn't suit me to approach them in more direct ways."

"And that would be how? With a sharp piece of glass jammed into their ribs?"

This tickles her, and she presses a delicate hand over her mouth as she giggles. "You'd like to know, wouldn't you, Ray? Oh, except you've probably got to go on *duty* soon. Or you're already on *duty* because you're such a conscientious Systems Hardware Technician."

It was close enough. At least she'd been paying that much attention. She was very pretty, but exhausting. So much unfocused, exuberant energy. Much more exhausting than pretty, really.

"You're a very odd girl, you know that?"

"I'm eccentric. My entire family is eccentric. We can be that way because we're wealthy. Unbearably, fabulously wealthy."

"Because you get paid by the word? Or by the offense?"

Like slamming a door, all the play goes out of her. "You're not very nice after all, are you?"

Ray returns to his noodles. He doesn't watch her anymore, though it normally wouldn't have bothered him to watch her for quite some time--hours and hours, in fact--if she had a volume control. Eventually, when she doesn't give up and go away, he says, "I'm actually quite nice, when I'm not being verbally assaulted by pretentious little snits, especially when I'm eating breakfast."

She is silent for a few moments, and Ray congratulates himself smugly. Then sighs. Then feels the imminent psychic slap his mother would have doled out to him had she been standing close enough to hear.

Ugh.

"Would you like to join me?" Ray asks, smiling thinly in defeat.

See, mom? Mom, you know I love you, okay? You know I think you're the greatest woman to ever walk the face of the earth. You're the bees knees and all of that. But I've got to tell you, really. I've killed maybe a hundred men in the last ten years, and I don't mean shooting at them across three or four hundred meters of sand or picking them off fortifications from behind a sniper's scope. I mean, I've killed them. Face to face, looking into their eyes, sticking sharp things into places they never wanted pointed objects stuck, blah, blah, blah. I didn't hate any of them, mom. I wasn't rude to them or inappropriately angry with them or behaving crassly like those filthy Heatherman kids that frisked around at the end of our street. If such a thing can be said, I killed them in a dignified way I thought wouldn't make you completely ashamed of me. Most of the time, at least.

I've been a good son. Really.

So couldn't you have just backed off for a second and let me be rude to this annoying girl? I would really have liked you to give me a break on this one.

Emma grins back at him, slowly and warily. In a small voice, she says, "I like Thai."

The lights come on, her stunning blue eyes spring wide, and she's off again, electric and vibrant and chillingly incandescent. "I adore it, actually." Ray pushes the chair across the table from him out with his foot and she drops into it, the tide of her words rolling on. "I would have thought you'd be eating American, Ray, a big, strapping farm boy like yourself. You do like to eat American don't you? Or has your head been turned by foreign...tastes."

Oh, she was wicked. Delightfully so in some ways, when she didn't generate in him the urge to strangle her.

"What makes you think I'm American."

"Your accent gives you away. Like mine, I suppose. I'm American, too. Originally, I mean. I was born there." The smile, the eyes, a wink. "So do you? Do you like American?"

"American food makes me homesick," he says, which was pretty much true.

Click. Click. Click. Pieces of a puzzle he wasn't aware he had been assembling drop into place, revealing a landscape that was hauntingly familiar. That Whiston. *Those* Whistons. Not a disinherited, starfaring branch living off the name and the notoriety, but the actual root of the family tree. It was as if she'd said the magical words Rockefeller or Gates or Primus to a latter day, goggle eyed Horatio Alger protagonist. The air seeps out of Ray's lungs and doesn't return for several seconds.

"Please don't look at me like that, Ray," Emma says.

A shake of the head. "Like what?"

"Like I've tipped my hand and shown you all of my cards." She knew that he knew, and the plaint in her eyes was suddenly there, as real and naked as tears.

In that instant, he understands much. "How about I just go back to leering when you're not watching?"

"I'd like that."

"I'd like that, too, but it isn't exactly polite, so I won't. Would you like me to order something for you instead?"

She eyes his bowl without any self-consciousness. "I'll just take yours, if you're done."

This strikes him as odd, given that she could have probably bought Uk-Thong about a billion times over. But he lets it pass without comment and says, "The rat's been in it."

It doesn't appear to bother her. Emma snatches away the noodles, even the fork from his hand. Nomar whistles at them both as if he doesn't understand the transaction that has just taken place, except for the fact that proper etiquette has relegated him to a rice diet for the rest of the meal.

Ray waits until she is finished. Emma sucks up the last noodle, bending over the bowl just like a kid experiencing spaghetti for the first time, then leans back into the chair. She slumps down with her arms wound over her stomach, her lips curled in contentment. She heaves an impressively satisfied sigh.

She must be all of twenty years old, Ray realizes, if that. He resists the urge to feel like an old man, thinking about what he was doing when he was twenty. Russoturk bullets and all that.

"So, no escort this morning?" He hopes this does not sound like a proposition. Or is it that he thinks he should hope it doesn't sound this way, rather than actually feeling it?

She is young, yes, but striking. Her legs, long and athletically sculpted, splay out from the side of the table at an attractively obtuse angle. It's difficult not to stare at them, and at the shortness of her skirt, and on up her lithe torso at the silk blouse with just the right number of buttons unfastened to be provocative on her terms.

Ray isn't precisely certain what he's thinking, and he can't stop to sort it out. She keeps looking at him, her eyes vast and innocent, her expression so open and trusting, it's completely disarming. Even before New Mes,

he's never seen anything like it, like her.

"Your brother, I mean," Ray prompts her.

"He sleeps late. It's a family curse, you know. We have nocturnal habits. Mostly bad ones."

"Except you."

"I've been forced to cultivate new skills lately. I was in school."

"On Stratiskaya Daransk?"

Emma nods, but it's clear the topic is not of particular interest to her. "At the university. And despite my father's considerable contributions, the esteemed administration couldn't be persuaded to make even the basic accommodations to my preferred schedule." She laughs, a clean and pleasant sound, without undertones. "I'm just being silly, of course."

"And now you're done with school?"

Her gaze flickers away uncertainly. "My brother was sent to fetch me, to bring me home. My mother is ill. The family needs--oh, you know. Family responsibilities. Frederick still bears the brunt of it, of course, because he is the scion of such a great and noble house, but he can't care for mother and the charitable trust and the businesses and everything else, even with Amah--" She stops herself abruptly. "It's boring, Ray. A long and boring story."

Ray nods. He understands something about exigencies, long and boring, but which remain exigencies nonetheless.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"Don't worry. I'm certain Frederick has already provided the necessary tutors to complete my education. He can't very well let his *little* sister be practically a cultural illiterate! That would be so mundane, so crass."

Ray had actually been thinking about the ailing family matriarch, but he thinks it's probably best not to clarify the point. Instead, he says, "Well, maybe getting home won't be so bad. I'm sure there have been some exciting changes in your absence. Outlier colonies tend to ebb and flow rapidly."

"You've been to New Holyoke?"

"No, but I've seen other colonies."

Emma sits up sharply, her features instantly animated. "Then you should let me show you about when we arrive, yes? At least Blackheath Grange. We could discover it together."

Paraclete will take at least two weeks to take on new stock and fuel, process outgoing passengers and perform the million other numbing tasks required to hurtle her safely back to Alamai Plantation. "If there's time," Ray concedes. "There'll be a ton of things for me to do during docking protocol."

"But the captain always lets the crew shuttle down to the city for a little while. Always!"

"I'm sure he will, but who knows when that will be? You might be otherwise occupied by the time I'm free."

She makes snorting noise, as though he's the one who has insulted her this time. "I'll lock myself in my tower until you send me word. That way we can discover the Grange together."

"Now you're being facetious."

"I'm not!"

"You won't lock yourself in a tower."

She points an accusatory finger at him. "You don't think I have a tower, do you?"

"I'm sure you do."

"You filthy, little liar!" Emma explodes into laughter. "Now you must come down. It's a point of honor that I show you both my city and my tower--and the fact that my word is beyond reproach."

Ray tries to think of something witty to say, something unembarrassing that will keep up his end of the bargaining, but he can't help but think that she's had much more practice at this sort of thing than he has.

This is all well and good, this casual sexual repartee, punctuated by Emma's aggressive pursuit and frequent surge of pretty laughter. It has an underlying tone of intensity that Ray finds unsettling, but not in an unpleasant way. He is reminded that it has been a number of years since he engaged with a woman on this level, that is to say, on a level in which he wasn't mentally thumbing through the bills in his wallet or crunching the digits available on his cred account to determine if he could afford actual intercourse or would have to settle for a blow job--a transaction ultimately made that much more dicey by the fact those women generally spoke a brand of broken, transaction-oriented English that was all but unintelligible.

On the other hand, if this is normal, it is a wonder people ever manage to get together.

The unfortunate part about being a soldier, or having been a soldier, is the tendency of the martial life to strip everything of glamour. World travel becomes hurried jaunts in the bellies of a series of noisy and flopping aircraft which transport you to destinations no man in his right mind would choose. Mano-a-mano battlefield glory turns out to be a sweaty, grunting, exhausting affair after which the only thing you feel is either a growing sense of weariness as your guts collect in a pile on the sand, or a numbing, insistent stab of guilt. Seduction is a financial transaction with girls young enough to be your kid sister, except they're your kid sister thirty pounds too light, two weeks unbathed and beneficiaries of a dental system whose technology has not yet evolved to include the introduction of the toothbrush.

Suddenly, Emma says, "Oh, crap."

Because he's offended her by not saying anything in too long, no doubt. He's exposed the uneven field upon which they've been playing.

"I'm working it out," Ray says. "Give me a minute."

But she isn't looking at him. She's not actually looking much of anywhere so much as she's making a concerted effort to fold herself under the table. Ray has had extensive experience with the art of public fellation, so this doesn't throw him completely off. He's instantly well on his way to becoming erect, in fact, a reptilian-brain response to a recognized set of visual cues; but he's also a bit disappointed, given that he's spent the last half an hour negotiating traditional sexual terrain and was just starting to remember the rules well enough to participate. She could have saved a lot of time and aggravation if she'd gone straight for his trousers in the first place.

Emma doesn't go all the way under the table, though, just sinks below the level of the privacy wall separating their table from the concourse.

"My brother," she whispers fiercely.

"Your brother," Ray says, nodding. Of course. This is another of those traditional sexual terrain bits that he'd forgotten about.

"He's looking for me."

And why wouldn't he be? That is the way brothers act in the normal world, as surrogate guardians of their kid sisters' virtue. Ray should probably spend a few moments deciding among expressions and body language that suggest abashment, outrage, guilt or just a generalized confusion.

Since he hadn't registered anything about Frederick Whiston the night before other than an archetypal sense of agitation, Ray peers after Frederick Whiston through the leaves of the ferns. He's thin and dark, the negative image of Emma's glowing vibrancy. Sallow complexion, hair slicked back from his forehead, eyes hooded as if the lights are too bright or the lids have been trained to provide an air of condescending superiority. This morning, Frederick has been hastily put together. He's wearing last night's dinner jacket and slacks, both of which have the rumpled appearance that comes from having been slept in. He has missed a button on his white shirt, and the collar stabs up toward his chin. Unshaven, glassy-eyed, would probably have been unsteady on his feet if he wasn't bowling down the concourse like a steamroller without brakes, Ray suspects that Mr. Frederick Whiston carries about him a reek of sour alcohol and liquor sweat in a three foot diameter halo.

Ray sees Frederick coming; Frederick sees Ray watching. The scion of the Whiston fortune switches tracks and banks into the Bangkok House's food court without slowing down.

"I think he's spotted us," Ray says apologetically. "Sorry."

Emma pushes herself up in her seat, frowning. "I'm the one who is going to be sorry. You can count on it."

Whiston wheels to a halt beside the table. He's breathing hard, almost panting. "You should have left word that you were going out," he says to Emma. "I've been looking all over the ship for you."

Ray was right. He smells like the victim of a liquor store explosion.

"I was hungry," Emma responds. The corners of her mouth crease in a frown. "I didn't think you'd be up this early."

"Obviously." Ray gets the impression that Freddy rolls his eyes, but he can't actually see it because he's facing Emma as if she's the only one at the table. "Amah sent me to collect you. You need to return to your quarters."

"I will." A pause, like defiance. "In a few minutes."

"That's unacceptable."

"Leave me alone, Frederick. I said I'll be home shortly."

Like an asp, Whiston's pale hand darts out and he grips Emma by the arm. He squeezes until his knuckles are white. "Come along, Emma. Let's not create a fuss, okay?"

For an instant, her gaze dashes from Whiston to Ray, a mute appeal in her eyes, then she gasps. "You're hurting me."

"You're making me."

Ray figures he's got old Freddy by three inches, probably thirty pounds and a skill set that includes the ability to kill trained military personnel who possess a strong desire not to end up dead. And he's tired of glowering at this idiot's back as though he was invisible. Ray hauls himself to his feet, screeching the chair along the tiled deckplate as he rises, and extends a hand which happens to be roughly the size of the circumference Whiston's neck in greeting.

"Hey, sorry to intrude on this scene of domestic tranquility," he says, growling. He jabs his fingers into Whiston's ribs, in case he's tempted to ignore something as genial as a handshake. "Ray Marlowe, with an 'e'. I had the pleasure of making your sister's acquaintance last evening, and the extra pleasure of renewing it this morning. We were just about to take a stroll with Nomar here." Nomar, taking his cue, lifts his head and bares a jagged row of titanium alloy canines. "Get some exercise, you know? I could have her back at your place in about an hour."

To his credit, Whiston does not flinch. He also doesn't release his hold on Emma's arm. Turning his head slightly, so he gives Ray a solid profile headshot, he transfers his glare from Emma to Ray. "I can't say I'm particularly interested in your acquaintance with my sister, Mr. Marlowe. I'll have to ask you to excuse us."

"That's okay, because I'm not feeling much in the mood to excuse you. She's already told you that you're hurting her."

It doesn't take much, just a focused punch with his index finger to the kidney Whiston has left exposed. Whiston grunts, more in surprise than in pain as the left side of his body--unaccountably and without having been granted the proper permissions--collapses. A pronounced starboard list turns into full on roll, and he spills across the tabletop, arms flailing for something to catch him.

Nomar just has time to skitter out of way by diving from this table to the next. The bowl of rice is not so agile and totters over the edge, where it shatters against the floor, fanning white grains like maggots at Ray's feet.

Ray doesn't want to hit him again. Assaulting passengers in public is bad for his cover.

Emma leaps up, gets the chair and a buffering couple of paces between them.

"Your sister is a nice young woman," Ray growls, fixing Whiston with a cool expression reminiscent of a whetted knife. "I'd appreciate it if you treated her that way in my presence. No, I think I'd appreciate it if you treated her that way in general. Are we clear?"

Frederick Whiston rises, wincing. Bits of tofu Nomar had left undigested cling to the lapels of his jacket. "This is none of your business, Mr. Marlowe."

He says Ray's name as if he's committing it to memory. Probably to file some sort of complaint with the Watch Officer.

But Frederick does nothing more threatening than turn away, back to Emma so that Ray can't read his face. "Do what you want, but the children are expecting you."

Children?

Emma cowers for a moment, but her brother, having delivered his message, is apparently done. Still listing, he stalks past her and out onto the concourse. In seconds, he's disappeared from view. Back to whatever pit it was that spawned him, Ray thinks.

He presses his hand toward Emma, open palmed. "Are you okay?"

She's shaking, hugging her shoulders as if to keep from sobbing. "I should go."

"What did he mean about the children?"

But she shakes her head. "Thank you for breakfast, Ray. I had a good time."

"Emma--"

Does he hit you? This is what he means to ask, what he should be asking, but even the bare thought of it makes him feel violent. But in the space between words, she slips close to him. Her small hands pull his face to hers and she kisses his lips, cool and dry and hungry.

Without another word, she's gone.

The rest of his day is spent the way most of days pass on *Paraclete*. Ziggy rides him for duty failures that may or may not be legitimate or even vaguely associated with his own personal fault, then tells him Nina has packed along some lasagna from last night's dinner that he can have as long as he promises to remember to get the dish back to her. He makes two retrievals of malfunctioning drones. He performs some perfunctory upgrades to the drone system control frame. Around this, he codes new search parameters into the drones' surveillance routines, uploads a dozen petaflops of gathered surveillance data for pattern searches and anomalous chemical traces from the rat network's latest security sweep, trying to skew all his available resources in a clever and anonymous enough way that the other systems vets won't notice that he's been tinkering with the rats, and on the chance that they do notice, won't suspect it's anything but a buggy command sequence and definitely won't trace it back to him.

This extended deception is arguably the most difficult and entertaining portion of his job. He should also be refitting Nomar for another survey of the reactor vent, but for some reason can't seem to muster the energy to get it done, though he does find the strength to run a separate pattern analysis on the series of rat vocal sequences to see if he could develop a shorthand method of understanding the assorted chirps and whistles and whirs. He doesn't have a good reason for doing this.

Somewhere in that time, he checks his text messenger and finds the massively encrypted, viciously terse note from Sorensen which says simply *Would you like to explain to me why you have decided it is a good idea to start assaulting my passengers?* Ray does not feel like fabricating excuses, so he deletes the message unanswered. He spends several minutes plotting ways in which he might plant some explosives of his own in Frederick Whiston's sleeping compartment while at the same time evading suspicion. The conundrum has all the makings of a logistical disaster, so he abandons it, though unhappily.

He wastes whole hours at a stretch thinking about Emma Whiston. Not proper thoughts like how he can protect her from an abusive older sibling who is about to lock her up on the family's frontier estate where he can put his hands on her unhindered--those were covered in his Frederick death musings--but highly distracting mental exercises that leave him with wide, goofy grins and a damp ball of queasiness in his stomach.

He also considers that it is way past time that he prepare an official case update for transmission back to his CIU handler, but as he suspects his handler is not a real person, but a computer generated facsimile of an actual CIU agent, he claims investigative latitude or dearth of significant developments or any number of other plausible excuses, and doesn't do anything. More than likely, when he does generate status reports, they're deleted unread so as not to compromise his cover anyway. Then the hard disk to which the messages have been saved is removed and incinerated; the assorted satellites and relay beacons which carried his message are remotely detonated to preserve the anonymity of his signal; teams of sweepers are dispatched to eliminate the crew of the ship he happens to be on, plus anyone with whom he might have had contact, plus anyone who might have witnessed him having contact with one those people, and eventually anyone related to any of those witnesses who might be tempted to complain about the sudden disappearance of their family member. That constitutes an entirely too egregious waste of human and material resources to justify sending any sort of message, at least in Ray's estimation.

About the time he's finally ready to knock off for the night, Ray receives an encrypted internal comm call from Chief Becker. This immediately strikes him as a bad development. It might really piss him off just hearing the preliminary chime that indicated an incoming encrypted call, except it's from Becker (which he knows because the comm unit's LCD screen scrolls Becker's shipsys ID as the call's originator), and Becker has not shown himself in the past to be some sort of chronically inflicted idiot who would do something so stupid as to place an encrypted communication to a service level hardware geek--something foreign agents of the Lilaiken separatist movement would be certain to notice, and even if they didn't, Ziggy certainly wouldn't let pass without comment.

People in jobs like Ray's do not appreciate having their cover potentially shot to hell by anyone other than themselves. Becker has been in the security business long enough to appreciate that, even if he did spend three quarters of that time dead drunk.

So it's only because he trusts Becker that he plugs a privacy headset into the comm unit and punches in his code key. The comm unit is a square, black box like an intercom attached to the terminal on his desk. Most of the time it functions exactly like an intercom, broadcasting personal and ship's information messages on an open channel. When an encrypted message is beamed to a particular unit, an angry, red indicator begins to flash, the LCD screen tumbles shipsys ID verification codes for everyone patched into the transmission and the unit pings the terminal's encryption software to challenge the user with his pass key to unlock the message scrambling. An unscrambled voice comm sounds something like a pair of tomcats wailing the tar out of one another, one of those grating noises that have been scientifically proven to cause normal and otherwise sane human beings to grind their teeth down to mere nubbins.

Ray gets to listen to the cats whooping it up for the several seconds it takes him to punch in the text equivalent of a 512-bit encryption key. The comm unit hums for a moment, chugging merrily along, and eventually the cats work out their business, and are replaced by a sultry, southern-tinted woman's voice informing him in a monotonously looped message that he has an encrypted call from Security Chief Andres Richard Becker! Please input your 512-bit encryption key now.

It is a very sexy voice which says these things, which does not in any way mitigate Ray's desire to track her down and punch her in the mouth.

He clears the system to patch the message through. The connection opens with an audible click, and Ray says, "I can't even begin to explain to you how much trouble you are in at this moment, Becker. You'll be lucky--no, you'll be officially smiled down upon by God and Jesus and the entire freaking host of heaven--if foreign agents don't blow this ship up in the next three minutes. Or at the very least send a death squad down here to make a bloody mess of my work area."

He's mostly kidding, and laughs to make that point clear. But he still whirls around in his chair so he can

watch the shop's door, in case roaming death squads happen to stumble by looking for directions.

Becker does not return his humor. "We have a problem."

"I gathered that."

"I want you to meet me on Sub-Deck Omicron, Section 944. Right now." Becker's voice carries an edge as sharp and jagged as broken glass. "Bring a drone with you."

"What's going on?"

A hesitation, as though he didn't trust the encryption. "There's been a murder."

Is that all? Ray thinks, but he's had enough sensitivity training to keep from actually saying it. "I don't see why you're involving me in this."

"You will if you shut up and get down here."

In the background, Ray can hear a flurry of voices. Then the distinct, guttural burst of someone vomiting, their effluent making a wet slap against the deckplate. Off microphone, obviously to someone else, Becker barks, "Get him out of here, Anderson! This is a crime scene, gentlemen. Let's try to give it the proper respect."

Ray stiffens, instantly alert. "Who's there with you, Becker?" Was the Chief determined to expose him? Because it sounded to Ray's straining ears as if he had an entire team in place already. A complete klatch of security personnel who theoretically had no need to know they had their very own pet spook on board *Paraclete*. And Becker, beckerbeckerbecker, *understood* this! Ray could hear it when he spoke, his consummate understanding of all the things he was jeopardizing. And still he went forward. A surge of adrenaline like an electrical current ripples through Ray's body.

"Just get here, Marlowe. Nobody is touching a thing until you arrive. I'm out."

The line goes dead. Sexy little southern belle informs him that the transmission has been terminated and reminds him to log out of the encryption software.

Chapter Four

It takes Ray and Nomar a few minutes to get to Sub-Deck Omicron. It is decidedly out of the way of normal pedestrian traffic, down in the bowels of the ship where passengers aren't permitted to travel and where the infrastructure still manages to resemble the militant design *Paraclete's* engineers had originally envisioned. Despite the fact that his cover is more or less wrecked, he avoids the main lifts where he might encounter other crew or franchise workers and wends his way by a complex network of bare stairwells. If he's lucky at all, he might at least be able to contain the cover-wrecking to the security team Becker has in place. That would be moderately less catastrophic.

Omicron is a drafty, dim, gray space with narrow gangways that pass between pressure resistant bulkheads. Footsteps clang and their echoes roll eerily along naked flexsteel walls, but it isn't quiet down here. There are no acoustic suppression measures, and the hum of hydraulic lifts, the deep rumble of power generators, and even the growl and hiss of the Van Nuys reactor which powers the thrust tubes reverberate through spaces filled with dead air like the din of forgotten conversations.

Ray counts off section numbers as he goes. Most of the sealed bays in this portion of the ship are basic storage bins, metallic shipping crates stacked floor to ceiling and locked to the deck by localized electromagnetic grids. Fore and aft, in massive, reinforced bays that comprise three full decks, there are auxiliary matter cannon batteries and their attendant munitions depots, but those are vacant unless the Marines happen to be drilling, or in the event of an actual emergency. Goliath class ships like *Paraclete* tend to avoid most emergencies of the sort that require matter cannon intervention. As a result, Omicron has the hollow feel of a warehouse district, an empty space populated by only drone rats and the occasional security sweeper. A good place for mischief, or in this case, for murder.

Ray is thinking that what he's going to find in Section 944 is corpses of missing *Paraclete* crewmen stacked two meters tall, in ordered little rows like sandbags, each conveniently stamped on the forehead with the message I WAS KILLED BY LILAIKEN SEPARATISTS. Probably a few hundred of them. This is the only possibility that currently makes sense to him. Or maybe a plasma bomb the size of an evac shuttle. Maybe a plasma bomb *disguised* as an evac shuttle. That would be clever, something very Lilaiken. On the off chance that it isn't a plasma bomb, he tells Nomar to remind him to investigate all the evac shuttles later, just in case.

Anything less than the imminent detention of Lilaiken suspects, their immediate interrogation and short-order voiding into space is probably going to put him in a foul mood. More of a foul mood.

He stops counting doors after awhile, about the time he begins to encounter other people: mostly grim looking security guys heading in the opposite direction. Ray notes that the sec-os are wearing firearms, something they don't normally do since the passenger classes find armed crewmen to be vaguely disconcerting. Ray has gotten used to this, and he realizes that *he* finds armed crewmen a bit disconcerting himself. Even more troublesome is the pair of guards stationed outside the bulkhead door to Section 944. Not sec-o guards, but Marine guards. With rifles.

Ray approaches the door, and on cue, the rifle barrels cross to bar his path.

"Id," one of the Marines demands. He's shortish, stout, has the ideal jarhead buzzcut, built like a cork in a wine bottle. He's got sergeant's stripes on his arm and a badge that identifies him as Kilgore.

Real Marines, Ray realizes. Squared away Marines, as in, combat Marines. Guys who are so used to extreme security measures that they've mastered the professional shorthand of the trade. A sec-o would have demanded his Ship Systems Identification, as if courtesy mattered, as if they were dealing with people who didn't know the protocol and would require patience.

Marines usually just shot people who didn't know the protocol and rummaged about in their pockets for their ship's ID later, probably sometime after they'd cased the guy's pockets for cigarettes.

Ray shows them his card, gives them a stupid grin like the one he's wearing in the photo. The Marines aren't amused.

The one who had demanded his credentials, Kilgore, nods, satisfied. The rifles are retracted to their upright rest position. "Chief Becker said you should report to him before poking around."

"So," Ray says quietly. "What's going on?"

When he wants the security spin, he'll talk to Becker. What he wants right now is the truth, the ground level assessment, the bareboned and clinical report one Marine gives to another. And since he's already cover-wrecked with security, he might as well exploit his assets.

"Couldn't say, sir."

"Don't call me 'sir', Marine."

The man's eyes narrow, recalculating what he thought he knew--the accuracy of what he had been told. It's an old joke, basic training barracks humor after the first grunt gets nailed with pushing fifty or taking a five mile double-time nature hike for answering the NCO with 'sir' tacked onto the end. Marines find this stuff endlessly amusing--probably *only* Marines. The guy lets his eyes roam Ray up and down, from rat to ID to hardware geek coveralls.

"Right," he says finally. "Smith or Jones?"

FSA or International Intelligence Agency?

Ray grins. "Worse."

The Marine stiffens noticeably. Right now he's thinking military CID or special forces or some other traditional covert organization. It's enough to shake him up, which is the way Ray wants him.

"We've only been on about twenty minutes. Got here just about the time Becker was hollerin' for somebody to get him a locked line. They didn't let us in, just told us to guard the door and not let anybody in unless his name was Marlowe or he had captain's stripes on his sleeves."

"So you haven't been inside?"

"Nope. Just watched the dumbasses coming out."

"What do you think happened?"

He shrugs, doesn't really care. "Somebody got whacked. People are puking and shit. I figure it must be pretty bad, at least by sec-o standards anyway."

Meaning, not as bad as they make it out to be, more than likely.

"Does it strike you as unusual that you're guarding the door to a storage bay for a security investigation?"

"No more'n being chatted up by a Smith for doing it." Kilgore gives him a convivial wink. "Me and Rodriguez

were running inventory on the aft blast dump when the sec-o sweeper found the body. He gave us a shout on his portable and asked us to comm a call Becker on the crypto line. Becker asked us to seal the place down." He glanced at his partner, Rodriguez. "Figured it was better than counting shells all night, so we got clearance from the Watch and here we are. We didn't see anything strange, no whacked out drifters or knife wielding psychos--Becker already asked us. I just about punched him in the mouth."

Ray nods. For the insult, he meant. It was standard procedure when inventorying ordinance to keep the blast doors sealed and locked down--both to prevent hostile forces from gaining access to a ready supply of Marine weaponry and, in the event of an accident, to limit the destructive scope of any unintended explosions. The ludicrously reinforced doors closed when you started your count; they opened when you were done--any deviation from that order was in military terms the rough equivalent of falling asleep on guard duty in a combat zone.

Becker had insinuated that they might have been something other than diligent in observing their duties, that they might not be squared away soldiers.

"Why didn't the sec-o just call it in himself? Or call his station and have them do it?"

The Marine shrugs, indicating an unwillingness to venture a criticism. "Bobby's not bad for security. He did a pair in New Mes out of high school, knows the drill. Maybe he wanted somebody to pass the word that wasn't gonna have to run around pissing in their pants for ten minutes before talking to Becker."

Rodriguez rolls his eyes, but not unkindly. It was just Marines talking smack, which constituted about half of the average Marine's working vocabulary. "Omicron is a one man duty station, and that's too many most of the time. The sec-o is Bobby Diggs, and his station is all the way down by Section 12, right near the express lift doors. We're just at the end of the block, at least relative to his station. He saved himself ten minutes *and* stayed within the bounds of protocol by getting the message encrypted. Most of them, the security officers, don't even march the gangway. Too busy hosing the ethernet for tits, I guess. Bobby's straight up and five by."

"Bobby Diggs," Ray says, stuffing the name into his memory. "That's a start. I might want to talk to you two again later."

Sergeant Kilgore snaps to an imitation of attention, mocking. "Hoo-ah. We're on the hump deck anytime you need us."

"Marine Deck Four," Rodriguez clarifies. "In the bulge just aft of the auxiliary bridge. The Deck CO is Captain Cable."

Ray brushes past them. "Thanks. I'll talk to Becker and see if I can get you relieved sometime soon."

"Much appreciated, but no hurry," Kilgore fires back. "You understand."

Ray does, in fact. Better this than counting shells for the next twelve hours. At least this way they got to stand around and point guns at people.

Ray punches through door and enters the vast storage area. It does not feel vast to him. Metal shipping crates crowd in on both sides, the stacks easily seven meters high, creating narrow passages constructed of right angles and sharp edges. Pools of flickering light cast from the overhead fluorescents provide a dim illumination at best. As he walks, the naked deckplate rings with his footfalls and the click of Nomar's paws.

Nomar knows something is up. His sensor whip is fully extended, flapping at the ambient air like he's licking his chops. He squeaks a private monologue, though conversationally, as though he expects Ray to listen and

comprehend.

Together, they home in on Becker by chasing down the strident echoes of what seems to be a heated exchange. It reminds Ray of chasing fleet-footed Iraqi mercenaries through desert arroyos. Wrong turns, pauses at intersections to listen, dowsing for sounds. Finally, several blocks in and near what Ray assumes to be the center of the bay, they enter a sort of clearing. It's a hastily erected emptiness, apparently. Several crates have been maneuvered off to the side by a Bobcat forklift, cutting off the careful grid pattern with pell-mell obstructions. There was an attempt to stack some of the crates, but without the electromagnetic matrix to steady them, several have shifted, tumbled into passageways or tipped on their sides, suspended above the floor when they wedged between other containers. Given the roughly circular shape of the space and the arcanelly fallen blocks, Ray thinks at once about Stonehenge--about stepping into the center of a bizarre druidic rite of sacrifice.

The lights are better here. Becker has introduced a cordon of high powered halogen frames whose power cords snake off into the distance. Drawn from shadow to white glare, Ray shields his eyes with his hand. He hesitates and peers into the circle until he locates Becker.

Becker is on the far side, his face red, his mouth open, blasting away at some poor sec-o who has that bewildered look of some schmuck who has no idea why he's become the target for a Tourrette's caliber smack session. Ray scans the area generally, doing everything but shoving his hands in his pockets and whistling so he won't seem to be displaying overmuch interest in the sec-os undressing by his Chief. He makes it about halfway, holding back a bit in hope that Becker will calm down a little before he arrives.

Because there's the body, shoved slightly off to the side, not more than a dozen paces away from him. He scuds to a halt without thinking about what he's doing. Corpses are magnetic, attracting some core of metallic morbidity. Ray feels it's pull and his feet start to move, and the next thing he knows, he hasn't just sidled up to it, but he's standing over it, clawing through a shroud of shock that makes his face go numb and sucks all the moisture from his mouth.

Some kid, he thinks, some stupid kid?

Did what? Got himself on the wrong side of a few dozen rats? Dumped a couple of liters of hydrochloric acid into his lap? Swallowed a thermite grenade?

Stupid thoughts, attempts to grapple with something his mind refuses to understand. It takes awhile to orient himself, always does, no matter how many times you've seen it or things exactly like it before. To get over the automatic response that this isn't a hallucination or a joke, or just something unintelligible that his eyes can't process correctly.

But it's exactly what it seems to be. A kid, a boy, probably eleven or twelve years old. The flesh is white, marbled with blue veins, bruised along the naked buttocks and back where seeping blood has gathered just beneath the skin. Head thrown back, eyes wide and glassy, mouth open in a rictus howl that is black and wide and toothy, with the lips drawn up in a snarl. Hands splayed, legs wide, spread-eagled, toes and fingers jabbed at the cardinal points. And a gaping cavity, a mélange of dark crusted blood and white bone, where the torso should be. A body hollowed out like a canoe, done with tools as crude as paleolithic stone knives.

Ray sees it, wades through his obligatory moment of horror, the steps clear, mentally backs away, kick starts his brain.

So where is the rest of him?

Where is all the blood, the liters and liters of blood that should have spumed from a young body with a strong

heart the instant the chest was cracked?

Where are the organs normally crammed breastbone to pelvis, rhythmically chugging fluids along in an approximation of cosmic harmony?

Probably in that stone ring beside him, the one filled to the top with brackish, dark water like a soured well. Entrails lobbed like sticky wads of spaghetti, where they splash, sink, vanish.

But there is no ring. He's imagined it, made it up out of whole cloth. There's only the cold deckplate and sealed shipping containers and cold halogen glare.

Ray swallows hard, tries to wet his mouth, but his tongue only makes a clicking noise against his teeth.

"Don't puke all over my evidence," Becker says in his ear.

Ray turns to him, a welcome excuse to tear his eyes away from the corpse. "Holy shit."

"There's nothing holy about it." Becker grunts and makes an obvious display of not looking at the thing he's talking about. "So what do you think?"

"I think it's a lousy way to kill a kid." The acerbic distance he has cultivated as a professional soldier used to the presence of violent death is fully in place, and as always, he hates himself for it, if only just a little.

Becker is all business, sporting his game face, grim and determined. He has the same hollow depth to his gaze that Ray imagines in his own eyes. "It's a lousy way to kill *anybody*. Messy. Pointless."

Pointless is a good word for it, for a whole host of things, really. Why he called Ray, for example.

"What's going on, Rich?"

The Chief kneels down by the corpse. He has a ballpoint pen in his hand, and he uses it like a laser pointer. "If this is a crime of rage, or an abduction, I expect to find contusions here--" He indicates the wrists. "Or around the throat. If the kid struggles at all, I assume that I'll find marks on the face, or bruises on the neck. Or I expect to find indications of epidermal punctures where the psycho jacked the kid up with meds to keep him docile. I've got none of that. And you know what else I don't have?"

"Blood. Entrails. It didn't happen here. The body was dumped."

Becker cranes his neck so he can see Ray's expression. "Why would you dump a body here of all places? You know it's going to be found eventually. If not in flight, at the very least when we hit port and start off loading. And that's not even the beginning of the oddities. Do you know how hard it is to kill someone on a starship? Not physically, I mean, but to kill them and hide it? There's nobody on the ship that hasn't been checked in and id confirmed. Nobody gets off without the same procedures. This isn't some frontier dome where kids disappear by the baker's dozen every day."

"Which means that it was supposed to be found. A victim who wasn't abused prior to death, but was psychotically mutilated and then dumped in a relatively high traffic area."

"Seems to say there's more going on here than just murder, I'd think."

"I don't mean to sound like an asshole here, but why have you involved me in this?"

"Because I need to know if this is related to your current investigations."

Ray glances over the body again, pondering thoughts he hasn't entertained in years, but he doesn't share them. Becker doesn't possess the context to make sense of them. "People were killing each other a long time before the Lilaikens showed up."

Becker scowls. "Not on my watch, they weren't."

"This wasn't done by Lilaiken separatists," Ray responds, frowning. Dead kid or not, it's what is uppermost in his mind. That is the extent of Ray's responsibility, not nosing over carcasses with the Sec Chief. "Even if we stipulate that the kid had some kid of target value, they would have found a better way to dispose of the corpse. And, they wouldn't have mutilated the body. They're political terrorists, not monsters."

"You're certain of that?"

Something in Becker's tone nags at him, accuses him. "You believe this is some sort of statement? What would the content of such a message be from the Lilaikens, Rich? 'Look! We're not afraid to hack up kids to get our point across'? It's an untenable argument. They don't gain anything from a gesture this mentally disturbed."

"Of course, it's not nearly as rational as blowing up starships."

Ray doesn't know what to say at first. He feels like he's wincing, like he's one big, constant wince as he watches his career get sucked down the cosmic drain. "You know this wasn't done by Lilaikens. So what am I doing here?"

Becker takes a deep breath. "You're being handed the lead on this investigation."

"No." Flat, simple, implacable. This is so obviously bullshit, it has dandelions growing in it. "This is not part of my assignment."

Slowly, Becker rises. He tucks the pen in his trouser pocket. "It's being made part of your assignment as of now."

"You don't have the authority to pull me off my current mission, and I don't have time to do both."

"Time or inclination?"

"Pick whichever one makes you happy. I don't care so long as you just go away."

Becker jabs a finger at him and knuckles his features, a bulldog look. "You said yourself that you've all but confirmed this ship is clean. You're wasting your time chasing after terrorists. You have the expertise to catch the animal that did this, but more importantly, you've got the freedom to poke around anonymously without freaking the passengers out because sec-os are banging on their doors raising a ruckus and all but accusing them of turning child rearing into a blood sport."

"Rich, honestly, I don't have the training to do this job. We're two weeks out from New Holyoke, and with a learning curve as steep as the one you're asking me to undertake, the chances that I'll be able to make any kind of suitable progress are close to nil. It's a bad idea."

"I'm not the one who made the decision. Sorensen did."

So much for appealing to reason. "Sorensen should know better. My superiors aren't going to tolerate this sort of interference with my primary objectives."

Becker he places his hand on Ray's arm, makes a visible effort to relax. It's hard. Ray can see in the tense, bunched cast of his shoulders how hard it is. The Chief is a man on the verge of strangling someone to satisfy his urge for vengeance. "Your superiors have already consented. You think the captain can't pull strings with CIU because he's in deep space? That's all been done. He's called in a whole raft of favors to get you involved."

The fact that Becker has just dropped the three magic letters that were supposed to be the best kept secret on the ship stuns him a bit, shifts his entire perceptual universe on its axis. But it shouldn't surprise him. Nothing should surprise him anymore, least of all the fact that he has more than likely just walked into a political clusterbomb.

"How long have you known?"

Becker shrugs. "From the beginning. A guy of Sorensen's stature isn't going to let some yahoo spook with sealed mission orders on his ship. Sorensen talked to some friends in EED who happen to be friends of yours in CIU. All these guys go way back to the Miners' Rebellions, and the ties that bind them together are thicker than little things like agency compartmentalization."

Ray waves him off. "At least you left me my illusions this long."

Becker chuckles evilly. "The boss can be a real prick when he wants to be, I'll grant you. Bottom line is that we're all still on the same side, and the powers that be have agreed that you've got better qualifications to handle this investigation than any other available asset."

The Chief has no idea what he's talking about, knows nothing about the desert. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Be careful. Be anonymous. Most of all, be delicate. There are potential ramifications here that could shake the foundations of frontier space."

"I don't understand."

"The victim's name is--was--Micah Uytdehaage. That's Dutch, in case you were wondering. He was an orphan from one of the dome colonies in the Euro-Prosp, ward of the state. That is, until about six months ago, when he was rescued from foster care by the Whiston Charitable Trust. We picked up him and a couple dozen other kids on Stratiskaya Daransk for resettlement on New Holyoke. That's their thing, the Whistons, I mean. Rescuing underprivileged kids from the streets or bad social systems, teaching them skills and turning them into productive colonists."

"Frederick Whiston had quite a bit to say this morning in his official complaint to the captain after you put him on his ass. In between demanding that we either place you under arrest or shove you out an airlock, he managed to insinuate that you've managed to get yourself something of an entrance to the Whiston inner circle. Is that clearing things up for you?"

"You mean Emma."

"I do."

Unbelievable. If he possessed anything resembling a personal life, he would resent this unstated willingness to mess with it. "Freddy has misapprehended the nature and depth of our acquaintance."

"That may be true, but it still places you closer to the family than anyone else."

"And you want me to exploit my connections? For what purpose? To find an easy way to break it to them or to convince them not to sue the FSA for criminal negligence?"

"I just want you to cultivate that relationship for the time being. Stay on top of the Whiston family's movements." Becker chews his lip, then adds, "I don't mean it *that* way, you understand. Though it's none of my business if you think pursuing a little recreational contact will cement your involvement with the clan."

Ray ignores him. "The current status of my relationship with Freddy has taken on something of an antagonistic tone, in case you hadn't noticed. It is not going to prove very conducive to ingratiating myself enough to track them inconspicuously. Am I to assume that we're placing Mr. Whiston on the preliminary list of suspects?"

"Immediate family is always part of the suspect pool."

"You're being intentionally ambiguous, Rich."

"I'm trying not to be too explicit. In this case, involving this family, explicit is the same thing as politically explosive. Do you understand?"

"I understand that you're leaving out critical information that I need to know if you really expect me to do anything at all with this case in the time allotted."

Becker blinks at him, carefully expressionless. "You think so?"

"Much more than I'd tend to believe you'd back down from the Whistons or anybody else just because of the money they have in the bank or the power they might wield."

"Is that how you see it?"

"Yes. If it was anyone else, any other kid, you wouldn't think twice about banging on every door from here to the bridge and assaulting either the virtue or the decency of every passenger over the age of eight if it meant you would nail this guy."

Becker laughs, harsh and humorless. "I really don't want to spend the next five years of my life dangling in front of Whiston family lawyers, Marlowe. But don't ever let anybody tell you that wealth and celebrity don't buy certain privileges. We're going to be careful here. Careful and quiet and infinitely diligent. If Frederick Whiston is innocent, I don't want him to ever know he was even a suspect. If he's guilty, we've got to have incontrovertible evidence of his involvement."

"I don't think he did this, Rich."

"No? I would have thought you'd be more likely to assume that he had, given your experience. Care to elaborate on what makes you so certain?"

"Only if you're going to tell me what it is you're hiding."

"Fair enough." Becker consults his watch. "I've got a cleanup crew coming in an hour. You and your rat do whatever it is you need to do to gather evidence to bust this guy, then meet me in the Officers Lounge on Delta. We'll see if we can't satisfy our mutual curiosities."

Ray accepts what has become the inevitable with a quiet sigh. "All right. I'll play along, but I want you to do me a favor."

Becker is already moving toward the exit. "What's that?"

"You know those two Marines out in the hall?"

"What about them?"

"Pave the way for me to have them assigned to the investigation. If I'm going to be dragged into this swirling storm of crap, I don't want to be working with a bunch of fatass, undertrained sec-os. I want men who know how to do things my way. And I want to talk to Bobby Diggs before anybody else gets to him. Clear?"

Becker pauses, peers at him unhappily. "You just have to make this more complicated than it needs to be, don't you?"

"I'd say yes, but you and Sorensen have already beat me to it."

"You'll only work with Marines. You're serious?"

"Yes."

The Chief shakes his head. "I'll see what I can do."

Ray lets him go, watching and waiting until Becker has left the bay and sealed the door behind him. When he and Nomar are alone, takes few moments to just breathe. Breathe and focus, breaking down the things he must do into discrete tasks. Small blocks that will consume his complete attention. For this part, he doesn't want to imagine the big picture, only bits and pieces. Crime scene layout. Ingress and egress angles. Disposition of the body. Grids of likely trace evidence. Reconstructing from physical clues the way things might have happened, and why they might have happened in this particular way, leading to this specific result.

In all instances, he avoids a detailed and personal inspection of the body itself. Even after all these years, all the battlefields and Third World post-street fight abattoirs he has endured, being alone with a corpse still gives him the creeps.

But Nomar is a forensic pack mule, blessedly short on sensibility and long on AI designed curiosity. Ray gives him the necessary series of verbal commands--the most important one being not to break down the physical evidence into its component parts, especially anything that could be tagged as human DNA--then lets him scurry over the body, poking his sensor whip into freshly excavated cavities, along ridges of exposed bone, prying into mouth and eyes. Everything he sees, analyzes, touches is transferred to digital signal and loaded into his data core for later retrieval.

Ray doesn't even have to watch, so he doesn't, and by the time Becker's sweeper crew arrives to dispose of the remains, he is more than ready to leave.

Ray has never been to the Officers Lounge, so when he gets to Delta Deck, he's got to stop an actual officer who seems more or less embroiled in doing important ship-running things and ask for directions. This makes him feel like an idiot, above and beyond the fact that the officer insists on treating him like an idiot, then running him through an episode of Twenty Questions with corollary warnings and officerly pronouncements regarding why he shouldn't even be concerned about the location of a lounge he's prohibited by rank from

entering.

Ray strongly considers advising him that he seemed much more competent shuffling through his pile of reports than he does when he's using his authoritative, pontificating voice, and maybe he should just go back to doing whatever it was he was doing before Ray interrupted. Or maybe just knocking him on his ass, but since he's not certain that he's done being anonymous with the majority of the ship's crew, he does a lot of nodding and grunting and mumbling excuses about waste disposal and the weird twists of fortune it provides for Sub-Deck slugs like him until he's given leave to continue his Quixotic tilt.

There's a perfectly good reason why officers work so hard to maintain the class barrier between the guys with stripes and the enlisted barbarians. Mostly, this has to do with an archaic concept called Officers' Privilege, a glorious service ideal that essentially said that officers should get all the goodies and assorted comforts of home while stiffs in the field slept in tents on the ground and ate freeze-dried monkey dung for dinner--a concept, by the way, that the men on the front lines stopped buying roughly about the same time that the divine right of kings went out of vogue. And since most soldiers were handy with a rifle, military intelligence types had long ago determined that the only way to continue the practice of Officers' Privilege (which was something of a priority unless you wanted to see your best and brightest bolt for careers that actually paid a living wage) was to camouflage it, deny its existence, and otherwise envelope it in a twisted and infantile maze of misdirection.

Thus, without the corroborating testimony of the rat that there was an impending waste disposal disaster that threatened the life of the ship, Ray would have been SOL.

It takes only the briefest glimpse of the lounge for Ray to understand this.

The immediately following thought is that he would like to trade his windowless, suffocating berth for a corner of the Officers' Lounge. Not even a corner in fact. He'd take a grubby spot under the table, or even a bit of bare shelf space in the kitchen.

It's like this: if the Garden Level has been strategically designed to make the passengers forget they're not on luxury cruise liner navigating a splendid Caribbean sea, the lounge begs you to forget you're not the fancypants scion of an Old World, noble house stopping into a private club to meet with some effete Oxford or Cambridge chums and discuss how best to avoid doing any actually useful labors while still seeming to contribute to expansion of the Empire. There's rosewood paneling on the walls, polished to a burnished glow; scarlet carpeting deep enough to qualify as an official quagmire that requires a posting of various warning signs; subdued chandeliers that have nothing in common with lighting technology anytime after the discovery of the light bulb. Gentlemen in suits playing cards at circular tables around the room generate a smog of sweet cigar smoke and port wine laughter. Everything is wood, aged and dark and meticulously cared for. Everything that isn't wood is brass or mirrored or fabricated of some other substance that looks expensive and intimidating without distracting from the lounge's essential clubbishness.

From the almost tangible air of exclusiveness and privilege, Ray suspects he should probably even be saluting the waiters. He's almost certain the bartender has stars on his collar. The fact is that everyone is in uniform, but no one seems to notice ranks. Wedged in a leather covered booth by the observation windows, he'll be damned if that isn't a two bar lieutenant, rosy-cheeked and bright-eyed drunk, grossly enmeshed in getting himself inside the skirt of a full bird Marine colonel (i.e. colonel-ette). It's shameful, all of it. Shocking and decadent and deeply, deeply disturbing. So much so that Ray considers turning on his heel, marching straight back to his room and researching exactly what qualifications it is that he's missing for enlistment in the EED's Officer Training Academy.

Now that he's seen it, probably the only thing that keeps him from being murdered on the spot to protect its secrecy is Becker's lugubrious wave from the booth in the far corner. Baleful visaged officers stop short of

reaching for assorted firearms and quick-acting nerve toxins and go back to behaving with chummy, un-officer-ish charm and gaiety. No one even makes a show of expecting him to salute, though he'll probably have to sign a whole raft of privacy and non-disclosure agreements hastily drawn up by JAG wonks and demanding both his life's blood and the naming rights of his first twelve children if he ever mutters a word of what he's observed here.

Ray and Nomar navigate the cluster of tables in the center of the room and slide into Becker's booth. Becker has already ordered a pitcher of dark beer for Ray, but he's having water with a side order of char grilled steak that is most assuredly not a clever and artful protein paste creation. And a fresh tossed salad with potato. And bread so lately from the oven that it's still steaming.

This also should be disturbingly impressive, but Ray finds it merely disturbing. Any man who has seen what Ray has seen in the last hour shouldn't have the appetite. He watches Becker put away a forkful of dripping beef and flinches. He pours the beer and concentrates for several seconds exclusively on drinking and holding it down.

Eventually, when he's confident that he isn't going to vomit, Ray says, "You realize that you've dramatically overestimated the complexity and skill base associated with what I do, right? I'm not a cop."

"Sure you are." Becker wipes his mouth with a pale linen napkin, and has the decency to cover his plate with it. "You're CIU."

"I'm not in the investigations division."

"Then what are you?"

He has no problem being brutally honest. "An assassin, or at least I spend a lot of my time trying to kill people who consider themselves outside the law. All I do is authenticate the target or targets assigned to me by higher ups and drop the hammer on them. Finding the criminals in the first place requires a stockpile of intelligence several orders of magnitude beyond my meager share."

Becker frowns, an expression that plows thoughtful furrows on his forehead. "I know better than that. You're a smart guy, Ray. Your test scores pin you as a smart guy. Your mission debriefings and post-incident reports are brilliant. Combat citations, CO letters of recommendation--hell, you've got twice as many decorations as any man in this room." Becker fixes him with a significant look, like he suspects that Ray is considering turning into a wuss. "You *are* the lead on this investigation, plain and simple."

"I didn't say I was trying to get out of it."

"Then what are you trying to do?"

"Figure out why you're giving me all of this business about my qualifications and field experience. How about you tell me what's really going on."

Becker places his hands flat on the tabletop. Ray expects him to counter with protestations of innocence, or at the very least, deflections to orders from above. The lounge's abrogation of all things military must be contagious, because Becker doesn't even make the attempt. Rather, he says, "Why don't you tell me, eh? Tell me what happened outside Ba'dai, something more revelatory than the more-gaps-than-facts official report that made it into your service record."

This is the proverbial bombshell, a sub-nuclear blast that jitters Ray right off his personal foundations. He stares at Becker, who props his elbows on the table and his chin on his knuckles and stares right back like a

man who can pull out secrets and fling them into the air all day long. It is also all the things Becker would not tell him at the crime scene.

"They never let me see the official report," Ray muses at last, his voice quiet. "Strange, don't you think? Considering I'm the only one from my squad who made it out, the only one who could have written it accurately. They never even asked me to file a report. Just made the whole thing go away, turned it into a black bag, I assumed. But I guess they had to notify families and account for equipment. Easier to just half-ass it and bury it under a mountain of paper." Ray pauses, not wanting to say what logically comes next. "You got me into this because of Ba'dai?"

"Given the recent activities on the Lilaiken front, all incidents of this nature are immediately reported along the command net, back to FSA and related intelligence agencies. Because of your presence here, part of the contact list is the CIU. Lieutenant Colonel John Holcomb said you were uniquely qualified to handle this assignment. He said we should ask you to cross reference the significant details with your experience at Ba'dai, in case these incidents are related."

Ray snorts, wrinkling his nose the way he would if confronted with a foul odor. This entire situation has a lousy and pungent stink all over it, like rotting meat. "Jack Holcomb is a horse's ass. And he's insane. Certifiably so, if you'll pardon my candor."

"The way he describes it, he saved your career."

"Just so he could destroy it now, sure. Holcomb never lets a man wreck himself until he's wrung the last bit of use out of him that he can. This just isn't right, Rich. No, it's more than that--it's impossible. Isn't it?"

Becker doesn't say anything, probably because he doesn't know what to say. He doesn't know enough to contribute or how to poke Ray effectively until he gives up his secrets like a mausoleum caught in a temblor.

Ray sighs, deep and melancholy, then offers, "Are you a fan of coincidence, Becker? Of synchronicity?"

The Chief only shakes his head, without comment.

"Neither am I. The problem is, I'm not sure what that means in this case." Which is exactly what Holcomb would have recognized when Becker contacted the EED about what was going on below decks. The devil was in the details, so it was said, and Jack Holcomb was a man who kept his eye out for strange synchronicities.

He'd also had plenty of time to sit back and wait for Ba'dai and Ray to cross paths again, just as it had been promised. Plenty of time, and even more reasons.

"I'll tell you about it," Ray says, "but you keep your mouth shut until I'm done."

Becker merely nods, and after a time, Ray tells him.

For the fifth time in a century, young Marines chopper in low over the Iraqi desert, now the New Mes desert or whatever political hacks are calling it these days. This has become a right of passage for Indiana's young men--introspective, high and tight, squared away young men like Ray Marlowe. Except he's been around long enough now that he's young only in chronological years. In experience years, like dog years, he upwards of a hundred and fifty, and he's got the eyes for it. Swollen, smudged with bruises, dark like caverns and deep as a geothermal vent. He rides in the back, sitting on the floor, on the hard curve of his cover (what his kid brother would call his helmet), because he doesn't want to take a bullet up his anus. The underbelly of the chopper is

as soft and permeable as Smaug's waiting for Bard of Dale's magic black arrow. The cover is nanosteel kevlar. This is an old Marine trick, one everybody learns the first time you see a guy get his balls shot off by a bedouin tribesman taking potshots at an allied bird of prey.

He's more than happy to give the bench up to the lieutenant, because it not only looks like he's respecting rank, but the bench isn't any more armored than the chopper's floor. And you can't very well sit on your cover on top of the bench; you'd look like some kind of dumbass, assuming your feet could reach the floor so you wouldn't also have to worry about an evasive roll pitching you out into the clear night sky and the hundred foot drop onto the flesh-integrity threatening rocks below (which also just now happened to qualify as hostile territory).

This is pretty basic stuff, things like sitting on your cover, or recognizing that the strength of the Predator-class chopper is speed and the twin mini-guns mounted on each flank and not her ability to resist incoming fire, or knowing how to paint your face in tan and black and gray so you don't stick out when you're on the hardpan. More than the lieutenant knows, though. He's stiff in his new fatigues. Still got crease lines where he's had them hung up in a closet while he wore out his five hundred dollar dress greens.

No matter. These young LT's, Ray's seen them before. Suits from the local HQ in Babylon, sometimes from METOC (Middle Eastern Theatre of Operations Command) outside the rubble of Old Jerusalem, or even from Washington, DC. Wide-eyed combat puppies, some older than Ray, the ones with any sense scared and pale as grandma's fine linen sheets--and finally having it dawn on them that whatever idea they had that seemed so good in an air conditioned command bunker or office building outside New Mes has an entirely new dimension for the boys in the field, the ones toting their M202 snub-nosed assault rifles and cracking off rounds at Iraqi Kurds and Russoturk regulars.

Doesn't matter at all.

Ray takes them in, these young men, shows them around the semi-permanent tent village the Marines have thrown up in the desert and affectionately christened Wadi Wadi Washington, gets them laid by the cleaner Irani whores, the camp favorites, then provides a safe escort out to the desert combat zone that interests them, scares up some trouble that's more bang and holler than actual peril, and finally packs them hale and whole back into their transport planes with warm feelings of accomplishment, an impressive new tan, the occasional venereal disease, and the seed of story to share with the grandkids one day. (A story like kudzu, that will grow at an almost exponential rate with each telling until the LT is single-handedly turning the tide of the war with nothing but balls of steel, a recalcitrant camel and a jammed Colt pistol against a whole battalion Russoturk mechanized infantry.)

Everyone knows sergeants are the backbone of the military. What they don't tell you is that they're also the entertainment directors.

This LT ain't so bad, even if he does insist on believing Ray actually likes this garbage duty, this humping of gear through the desert and shooting at ragged bedouins and assorted dusty militants from the New Mes regime who don't have the sense Allah gave a camel (same camel, different flag) and won't just drop their rifles and call it a day like a civilized man would. The LT thinks he's John Freaking Wayne, treats Ray like some kind of July 4th homecoming hero. Ray thinks this is probably because the kid was twenty-two or three and still a virgin when he dropped in on Wadi Wadi. Ray had shining-eyed Dashira take care of that nasty little problem for him about a dozen times over while he supervised team selection and re-fit and placed his own calls to METOC getting explanations that made more sense than what the LT had to offer.

Only to find that the LT's bull was less opaque than METOC bull, which was rare and odd and troublesome, but mostly had to do with the fact that none of the wankers at METOC either understood the mission or chose to believe it. In their considered opinion, it was a lark being granted to a highly connected young officer with

too much classical education and too much imagination. Ray was more or less ordered to take a hand in the child rearing responsibilities of the LT's parents--toughen him up, show him what New Mes and the real world look like without him getting killed. The Disneyland of Officer Training.

So it's dark, it's like twenty-three hundred hours New Mes local time, they're ripping across the desert at a height of ten meters and kicking up a skirl of sand that stings the eyes and sticks in your teeth. Ray, Lieutenant Holcomb, Ray's comm specialist Kev Whitfield and a couple of other guys manning the mini-guns are in the lead chopper, with the rest of the team in the Predator behind them, tracking their route by infrared imaging more than visual. Kev's stuck on the bench with the LT and not real happy about it. He's got his M202, his subby, across his knees, but one hand over his balls, though it's no protection but a psychological one.

To the west, the sky is black, immersed in stars, the sand pale and continuous all the way to the horizon. East is the scant, twinkling lights of Karbala. Over the whup of the rotors, Ray can occasionally hear the massive thrum of the 8th Tactical Wing bombers shouting toward the industrial complexes on the city's fringes. Bursts of white hot, angry light concuss the distance like heat lightning or an out of place aurora borealis. He's got the scent of hot engines and diesel fuel wedged up his nose, but every great while he catches the clean odor of scoured sand and sun-baked rock.

It's all terribly exciting, and with the Russoturk armored divisions hunkered down to escape the allied smart bombs, Ray keeps having to snatch himself from the precipice of sleep. It's a helicopter thing, a deficiency he's not proud of. He blames his parents, who spent many hours of his first two years celebrating the documented American love for the automobile and the open road just because baby Ray happened to have a touch of the colic.

They've plugged along for about an hour when the pilot hops onto the comm line patched directly into the remote unit Ray has jammed in his aural canal.

"We're about a minute out from the drop point, Gunny. I'm going to guide us through a flyover to make sure the zone is clear. We'll hover three clicks east and wait for your signal."

Ray presses the pickups on his throat against his vocal chords so he doesn't have to shout over the rotor racket. "Negative. Do not sweep the drop point, gentlemen. The LT says surprise is essential to this operation. Make your hover two clicks and stay on the alert. Clear?"

Silence answers him, a pilots' conference in the cockpit. "Whatever you say, Gunny, since the tape's running."

A reference to the craft's flight data recorder. There's nothing more pathetic than a pilot covering his ass when asked to break protocol.

Ray flips his comm to the open channel and informs his men that the drop point is getting fat. He listens as they sound off, one by one. In the background are reassuring military noises: the click of safeties off, the ratchet of rounds being advanced into chambers, the mutter of private "hoo-ah" pep talks.

Then they're on the ground and the choppers are peeling back to a safe recon position like candy wrappers caught in a stiff breeze. They sprint almost due east, profiles low, clattering like some antique Industrial Revolution manufacturing machine. He's left the comm channel open, and he can hear his men, a Greek chorus of grunts and strong, disciplined exhalations. Their breath surrounds him like a geas of invulnerability. Ray drops the visor on his command helmet, obliterating a night of moonlit sand and night shadows. Geography becomes a sickly, greenish mottle sliced by gridlines and a peripheral scroll of compass points and tactical information. Just above his blind spot, left edge, a computer simulation tracks his squad of seven as orange, prokaryote blobs ranged around the yellow sliver that's supposed to represent him. He jumps the

display from light enhanced night vision to infrared with a sub-vocalized command. There are no heat signatures outside the ambient glow of the desert bleeding stored sunshine and the pulsating forms of Marines. Just a quick glimpse, then he flips back so he can actually see where he's going.

The narrow canyon, really just a sandblasted gully of tight switchbacks and wind carved angles as treacherous as swords, is different than the model generated by satellite images. It always is. Deeper in real life, more solid, the sides sheer and devoid of rugged features that might provide footholds and grips. It's one way in, one way out territory, a reduced scale model of a wild west box canyon. Seeing it, Ray's guts twist into a knot.

Another foray into infrared to check the canyon entrance for sentries, of which there seem to be none, then he pushes on with the operation as they drilled it. Dhamers plants himself behind an outcropping where he can cover their entrance with his subby and a patchwork of remote detonated personnel mines. Kluge deploys right, Hanfland left, up the steady incline of New Mes bedrock where they match pace with the insertion team and can provide a nasty crossfire from the high ground if necessary. Or they can pick off Russoturks trying to flee. Or even more likely, they can cower in the open with their thumbs up their asses, waiting for Kurdish bedouin snipers to pick them off while Ray lets Holcomb poke around the ashes of a cold campfire and analyze camel tracks and attempt to figure out why his quarry isn't where he's supposed to be.

Now five, himself included, Ray leads the plunge into the gully. Rocky overhangs slice the skyfield into an eight meter swath. Without sufficient light, his visor image shudders, then crashes into a rainbow of pixilated madness, and tries to recalibrate. He doesn't give it a chance, not when he's on the move and wending the jagged channels of the canyon, merely rams the plate out of his eyes and squints like everybody else. Cold desert wind cuts through the channel like a storm warning, whipping through the switchbacks and setting up echoes and phantom calls, the sound of spectral voices, the core root of djinn and ifrit mythology.

Definitely some creeperific stuff, despite perfectly obvious explanations.

But this is a straightforward objective. Lt. Holcomb has been using a complex series of high res satellite recon and inspired guesswork for the last two years to track a renegade Dispensationalist cleric named Ramah ibn Ona Hadad *nee* Mikhail Brezhnaya, sometime freakishly magnetic religious icon, but mostly an assclown terrorist organizer responsible for assorted embassy bombings, the biochem catastrophe in Calcutta and a dozen other moderately interesting attacks against Western tourists in his part of the world. What makes him interesting to METOC policy wonks is his pre-conversion rank in the Russoturk Crescent Army as head of intelligence operations in New Mes. It is a brain begging to be picked, doped, sliced into cross sections, scanned into a secure data environment, and interrogated in AI enhanced simulacrum form.

Holcomb has tracked Brezhnaya's movements and determined that whatever else he might do to evade capture, the cleric cannot resist this place, this canyon and a tightly scheduled semi-annual pilgrimage with a hand picked coterie of fanatical supporters. It is a defining pattern in a life that is otherwise devoid of useful signals.

Ray has done quite a bit of this, too much really, tracking elusive sandpeople to desert encampments that either don't exist or haven't been used in months. He's been on the trail of a whole constellation of minor military celebrities, with rising star lieutenants like Holcomb spurring him on. He shot Sheik Ahmed (famous enough to need only the one name) through the heart in hallway of a posh Baghdad whorehouse this way. Nothing particularly glamorous. Ahmed didn't even have a weapon, and even if he had, he was too busy trying to get his pants up above his ankles to put up much resistance. The LT behind that operation was now a Colonel two skips away from either a star or election to public office depending on which career he chose to pursue. These hotshots were right (or lucky) just often enough to be taken seriously.

But most of the time they weren't. Most of the time it was humping about in the desert on an adrenaline buzz, chasing ghosts like tantalizing sexual fantasies. Good small squad drills, though. Good times.

They break from the narrow defile into a wide, flat plain of solid stone. Ray pulls up, Pelton fans wide on one side, Waeltz on the other, rifle butts pressed against their shoulders, scanning for threats. Holcomb puffs up behind him, tailed by Whitfield, who's playing Secret Service agent to the erstwhile LT's Commander-in-Chief. Ray looks up to the canyon rim and runs his eyes around the circumference until he picks out Kluge and Hanfland, crouched low, backlit by stars.

There's nothing here but darkness and sloughs of loose sand abandoned in odd places by the frenetic vortical winds. And a round hole cleft into the rock. And the faint, almost undetectable yellow flicker of reflected firelight in the hole.

"Gunnery Sergeant Marlowe--" Kluge begins, a whisper in his ear.

"I see it," Ray murmurs, trying to strangle the projection of his voice. "Get me a good angle on the entrance."

"It's clear. No sentries." Kluge thinks about that. "How weird is that?"

Ray rolls his head toward Whitfield. "Hang back. Don't bunch up in your excitement." There's more ambient light here, and he drops his visor again. He studies the ground under artificial illumination, playing games with his eyes, looking for the glint of tripwires or the false bulge of camouflaged fragmentation mines.

Nothing. That is very weird, indeed.

It's all hand signals from this point, coordinating their advance toward the gash in the rock, getting Kluge and Hanfland's attention to indicate the squad is going in. Everyone has their visors down, knows to watch him, because they've been through this a thousand times before. Weapon at the ready, Ray advances. Waeltz and Pelton tuck in behind him, then Holcomb, then Whitfield bringing up the rear.

Ray plunges into the darkness. There's an initial burst of adrenaline, enough to make his hands want to tremble, but he just squeezes his subby that much more tightly, careful to keep his finger poised over the trigger. Then it's a quick advance, keeping his steps high and regular so he doesn't make scuffing noises. The path is a steep and angular ascent, stabbing into the rock on a curve, like the blade of a scimitar. It's dark, but not so dark that his visor can't amplify the reflected firelight from up ahead, so he relies on his night vision where he can reference the tactical display of his formation. The floor is smooth, chiseled flat by centuries of wind, and covered in sand grit.

A dozen paces in, he can finally hear sounds above the echo of the squad's collective breath. It's faint, a guttural moaning that slowly coheres into discrete chunks that are supposed to be words spoken in a shuddering, rhythmic staccato. A religious chant, this punctuated by a rolling thrum and slap like flesh against stone. Ray tells himself to relax, though the hairs have begun to prickle on the back of his neck. This is good news, exactly what Holcomb told them to expect. Brezhnaya is many things, but a cleric above all, and only some sort of ritual exigency would override his intelligence training, because religion is all about patterns and calendrical regularity and fulfilled expectation. It is the antithesis of spookwork.

So Ray slows and lifts his rifle to his shoulder. The path curves around to a portal bright with heat and light; he has to blink away in the instant it takes his visor to polarize, but then his vision is clear again, and he's looking down a last, brief chute into a chamber of some considerable size. There are no guards here, either, unless they're stationed inside, where they would do absolutely no good at all.

A long, forlorn and ululating cry chases them the final distance.

But they don't burst into the chamber as Ray would have them do, as they'd drilled it. Three steps, then a sort of stumbling halt. The soldier mentality drops away, submerged in a vat of darkness that is thick like oil.

The chamber is large, a man-made dome maybe thirty meters across. At regular alcoves around its edges, guttering clay lamps illuminate the dun colored rock, staining the curved walls black with their smoke in straight trails that look like charred ribs. There are a dozen men in the center of the floor, ranked into four neat files; they're down on their knees, the pose of a good Muslim facing toward Mecca. Except they're not praying. Rather, they're bent at the waist, their torso's straight, their arms extended above their head, and they slap their hands against the bare stone floor. The tight cadence of their slapping has become a reverberation that Ray heard in the tunnel, the chamber itself acting like a bell to their clapping. At the twelve o'clock, there is a sort of natural eruption of stone, a lectern that is melted like wax. Beside the lectern is a pool, a well surrounded by a low, stone parapet in the shape of a ring. The well is full to the top with a turbid and brackish and foul smelling water. In the space between pool and clappers, a shallow depression has been carved. Trenches the span of a hand spoke out from the depression to the pool, runlets which seem to have no purpose at first. Except that in this bowl are seven men, nude, laid out side by side, ranging in age from maybe twelve to thirty. Astride their hips sit seven more men. They're rigid, backs straight, arms held perpendicular to their bodies, mimicking triangles because in their hands are golden instruments that look to Ray like shovel heads.

A man at the lectern chudders at them in a stiff and incomprehensible dialect that sounds vaguely like Arabic, but not any form Ray has known. His hands gesture over the congregation and occasionally toward the pool in wide, orchestrated swoops. This is the voice Ray heard, rich and baritone, measured in pace, sounding like a New England chorister. He wears a coarse, white keffiyah like the other worshippers and desert bedouin's robes, but his skin is pale, muscovite pale.

Mikhail Brezhnaya.

Ray processes all these images and impressions in the first instants; his mind grapples for meaning, for a frame of reference.

And in that dry, eternal moment, Brezhnaya cries out. The shovel heads plunge in unison. The bodies of the naked men arch beneath the blows and they emit a gurgling, gasping grunt. Strike and drag, like rowing an oar through a sea of flesh, the Dispensationalists core their victims out, scooping entrails and flinging them in wide, steaming arcs into the pool. The depression erupts with blood--spouted into the air, soaking into fabric, fanning out in ovaline swaths. The fluid races down the channels and pours into the pool.

The thrum and slap of the clappers rises to a feverish pitch as Brezhnaya lifts his voice in a counterpoint wail that is both awed by terror and thick with ecstasy, lifting and driving his empty hands in accord with the metered digging in the depression.

Stricken and numb, Ray sees the pool disturbed by blood, clouding the way coffee does when milk is added. But not red, as he expects. Black, and yet not black. Not *just* black, but an archetypal black that is the absence of light. A darkness that boils, then flares like a fountain; a fountain that draws itself away from the water the way oil floats on the surface of the ocean. And from the fountain emerges first a hand as dark as chiseled ebony, porous fleshed, twice the size of man's fist. Then an arm, a shoulder, a head cowled in fabric like sackcloth. A mouth of midnight teeth and a throat full of emptiness that roars with a voice resonant with distance and cold and the echoes of frigid space.

It emerges from the plastic chaos of the pool, with a howl that has become laughter as fierce as bloodied spears.

It is three full meters tall; its naked foot and splayed toes as wide as a man's chest. It has fingers like daggers with long, pointed nails. Completely black, skin and eyes and tongue, immense in dimension, radiating menace or raw, elemental power like a shout of warning.

But it's more complicated than that. Ray has the distinct impression that he's seeing with two sets of eyes, the

sense of viewing two images, one placed over the other. The first is this massive, impossible humanoid form. Behind it is something else. A thing of long, slick, tapering torso, bulbous head, rings of eye slits that peer in all directions at once. Gelatinous in consistency, sprouting tentacular arms like obscene appendages, sucking air through fine, quivering epicanthal folds.

He blinks at it, trying to correct his vision that will not clear.

Holcomb's voice comes from the speaker in Ray's ear, cool and clinical. "He's summoned it, the Devourer. We're too late."

Impossible.

"I would suggest that we withdraw, Gunnery Sergeant. Before we're seen."

Ray does not think, cannot think that way. His mind is not wired for comprehension. Consciousness drops, sinking below the higher brain functions, burying him in the cool and reptilian stem where thought dies and instinct emerges and primal shadows lurk in cavernous, midnight kingdoms walled off by evolution. He forgets about things like concentrated fire and three round bursts and center of mass. He just sprays bullets into anything that seems prone to moving. Back and forth, like a man watering flowers on a Saturday afternoon.

The worshippers have no time to react, no space in which to escape, and when Ray fires, his squad erupts in a supporting chorus. For a time, all Ray can hear is the bang and thunderous echo of gunfire. A cacophony of violence shreds bodies, sprays blood, mists the air of the dome with a tangy, cordite haze. He makes dead certain that he plugs Brezhnaya, pops him in the center of his forehead, opens a round hole like a third eye, before he can duck behind the shelter of his lectern.

But above the racket is another sound, vast and rumbling. It takes a moment for Ray to recognize it as a voice. Words emerge, thick like mud, resplendent with echoes of foreign tongues and wordless meaning that shimmers just below the aural surface.

"Fire consume you, strappado wrench your joints,

Limbs snap and bones break, eyes burst and tongue bind,

Love desert you, spirit fail

Ears shatter and flay the flesh,

Scald the nerves and fill with dark emptiness

Dome of heaven close against your prayers

Isolated you are, son of man.

Isolated be.

Windows of heaven shut before you.

Alone. Alone. Alone.

There is no God to hear the faithless faith."

Waeltz mutters something inchoate, half a thought. He does not so much crumble as he implodes, seems to swell minutely, then deflate as though his bone structure has evaporated. What remains is a pile of flesh, spilling fluids, white smoke sifting up from empty holes where his eyes had been.

On Ray's tactical display, the orange form that was Waeltz flickers and vanishes. Then Pelton. And Whitfield.

The words roll on, flattening Dhamers in his perch at the canyon's mouth. Kluge and Hanfland crouched on the rim. More, and Ray seems to imagine a perfect scene of Predators hovering two clicks away in the desert, suddenly stricken, noses dipping, plummeting from the sky, their rotors scraping trenches in the sand before they lock, shatter, detonate the choppers in blossoms of flame.

He knows a sudden and explosive sensation of pressure against his skin. Flame licks across his eyes. Acid seems to scour his nerve endings, buckling his knees. He goes down with his muscles locked in a paralysis like the grip of panic. The immense figure emerges from the pall of smoke, grinning darkly so that Ray can see his teeth, and behind that, the shadow of the other being, whose mouth is a gaping maw of darkness and mucous and razor teeth angled in vicious directions like shards of glass. It stops before him, considers him for a time that feels like eons, then presses a mighty hand--or filthy, slimed tentacle, he can't tell--against Ray's forehead. His head tilts back so that their eyes meet, and Ray waits for the end, for the flexing of obscene muscle that will split his skull and spill his brains.

But the grin remains. The mouth speaks, sonorous and confidential. "That one bears charms which bid me hold my hand, child of clay. You would perhaps do well to ask him why he does, but these others were not told of the ancient ways, eh? Require of him an accounting, or withhold, and I will seek him out in time. Short of span, I say to him, both in years and attention. Poor of vigilance is this creature, man. Your kind cannot help but stumble. So I say to him: watch and wait and gird yourself up, but in the end, it will not suffice.

"But to you, I say this: well met, brother. I think we shall meet again."

And then it is gone. Whether shambled away, out through the tunnel and into the expanse of the desert, or simply vanished, Ray cannot tell.

Ray tells the rest, realizing at some point that his voice has become thin, strained. He sounds like a man on the verge of shrieking. "We located Brezhnaya's camels tethered in their encampment about a kilometer to the south, right around the ruins of the village of Ba'dai." His throat is dry, parched with telling stories, and he thinks he'll probably polish off this pitcher of beer and another two or three besides before he feels right again. "Two weeks of evasive maneuvers and assorted hostile territory hijinks later, we rode into Wadi Wadi. Holcomb was on a transport that bypassed METOC and went straight to Washington by late that afternoon. Holcomb got kicked up a rank. I got a nice citation for valor and a medal, and everybody seemed to forget that I'd managed to lose all of my men out there in the desert."

He's spent a good part of the last couple of hours staring at his hands, striving to achieve the clipped, factual tone with which he has traditionally given oral debriefings. He performed poorly, he knows, because--well, because the dissonance between tone and content would only make things worse. But finished now, he shuts his mouth and tries on a grin with all the ambiguity of a shrug. He raises his eyes to the Chief.

Becker has adopted a sunken appearance, with his shoulders sagging like someone who's been slugged in the gut one time too many. His wrists rest against the table on either side of his plate as if their bracing is the only thing holding him up. He says nothing for a long time, then finally, "That definitely was not in the report."

Ray arches an eyebrow. "Does that surprise you?"

"Um, no."

Ray can count on one hand the number of people he's told about Ba'dai. He might have told more if the information wasn't still classified as really-ultra-mega secret or whatever the current parlance for weird military data was, but of those who carried the clearance to hear it, he'd only been around maybe one or two of them when they were actually drunk enough to halfway believe him. So Becker's obviously strained credulity neither surprises nor offends him. With a story like this, you have to give a guy a few minutes, let him roll it over in his brain and run his fingers over its distinguishing features until he finds something that lets him hold onto it, something familiar that will put the rest of it in perspective. Ray suspects that a fairly solid portion of humanity won't find any handle at all, and they either drop it and forget about the whole thing, or they wander around for the rest of their lives wondering every time they trip over this alien lump of data just how hard Ray was pulling their leg--or just how crazy he was.

Ray has made it a point to only tell people who have the power to check out enough of the details to verify that at least *something* strange happened, even if they can't be certain exactly what it was.

If they don't find something to cling to, there's a lot of general hemming and hawing or they tell you how interesting it sounded with a little wink that suggests they've found you out. But if there's something, anything, there follows only what Ray can surmise is a radical shift of consciousness, a broadening of perceptual horizons that invariably starts *Now let me get this straight*.

Becker makes an effort to pull himself together, straightens his shoulders. He rolls his tongue around his mouth and says, "Now let me get this straight. Lieutenant Colonel Holcomb--just plain old Lieutenant Holcomb then--drags you and a squad of combat Marines out into the desert to capture or neutralize a minor terrorist organizer. He didn't tell you about this, um, this ritual?"

"I wouldn't have cared if he had. I wasn't in a position to believe him at the time."

Nodding, Becker begins to gather speed. "But he anticipated this--what did you call it? Devourer?"

"He was aware that Brezhnaya wanted to summon an extraphysical being. It was my impression that he took the existence of such a being for granted, at least on a philosophical level. Whether or not he really believed it until he actually saw it is open for debate. I didn't really care to ask him." Ray offers an uncomfortable shrug. "I know this seems strange."

"You don't think it's strange." It was a statement, not a query.

"I've had a few years to get used to it. And I got out of the desert, where it had more of a tendency to freak me out."

Maybe it's the mutilated corpse of the young boy chilling in *Paraclete's* morgue, but Becker does not seem prone to disbelieving. "So what does it all mean?"

"I don't know."

"It has to mean something," Becker rumbles, clearly unhappy with the parallels. "Your experience then, what's happening here. It has to be related. How could it not be?"

Ray has been tripping over the same types of thoughts for the last hour or more, mostly trying to ignore them. He has no insights to offer.

"Tell me about this thing Brezhnaya pulled out of the pool. What was it?"

"It was a *shed*," Ray says, his voice low. "The Ialdabaoth's *shed*."

He hasn't spoken that word in years, and even now it chills him, a talisman of evil.

"What is it? Where did it come from?"

"Rich, I--" Ray spreads his arms, a gesture like pleading. "It's complicated, and I don't pretend to understand it. I don't even like to think about it."

But Becker is implacable. He shakes his head at Ray's refusals, crosses his arms over his chest. "Well you'd better get used to thinking about it. We need to know what we're looking at here. We have to know how to combat something like this. Something that can kill with *words*, for God's sake. What it is, where it comes from, what it wants."

Ray stiffens. "What are you talking about?"

"If there is a *shed* aboard this ship, we have to know how to stop it. You have to tell us."

But Ray shakes his head. "That's just it. There isn't a *shed*. If there was, we'd know about it by now. There would be bodies everywhere."

"Not this time, maybe," Becker responds. "But that just means that our boy will try again. It means he failed, and next time, he'll be more careful. He'll make sure he gets it right. Look, there's no doubt that our killer was trying to duplicate the rituals you saw Mikhail Brezhnaya practicing. Most killers do not, Ray, *do not* jerk out the living organs of children. And we're not going to give him another chance to get it right, is that understood?"

"Yes."

Becker arches an eyebrow. "You don't think so?"

"I told you, I don't know what to think."

"Then you tell me what it is you know, or think you know, that makes this so confusing. Because from my perspective, this is pretty flipping straightforward."

He's right, of course. Ray has known it from the first time he saw the body. Whatever else he might know or think about the murder, what the killer was trying to do--or simulating having done--was summon of a *shed*.

"I only know what Holcomb told me, the things he said when we were in the desert afterward. When we were making our way back to camp, to Wadi Wadi. I didn't try to verify his conclusions, Rich. I didn't care to think about it any more than I had to, and by the time I would have had opportunity, I was...busy with other things."

This is all embarrassing, vaguely disconcerting, like talking about masturbation.

But Becker waggles his hand impatiently in a gesture of invitation. *Bring it on*. "Tell me."

Ray grins at him, wearily, warily, trying very hard to give the impression of a man with a firm and complete grasp on his sanity. "What do you know about the Gnostics, Chief Becker?"

"What should I know about them?"

"Nothing, actually. At least not if the founders and early practitioners of Christianity had had their way. It was one of the first big heresies. It's also the only way we know anything about the *shed*."

Becker grunts. "Then you'd better start from the beginning."

From the very beginning, Ray thinks, farther back than Becker even imagines. Before the earth was without form and void and darkness gathered upon the face of the deep. How do you even begin to explain such things? So much of it he hasn't thought about in years, so many angles and bits of information. It's hard to keep straight, even for a man who might want to.

"I want to be clear with you on this," Ray says, because if Becker is so determined to pursue this route, he should know that reliability and verification of underlying data structures are not the hallmarks of this reference system. "What I know, and what I'm going to tell you, is all Jack Holcomb's hypothesis. Holcomb was, and is, one of the leading experts in Gnostic myth and theology. Even by the time I knew him, he'd pored over the Nag Hammadi corpus for years, and later over the manuscripts discovered at Bar Ka'heli. It's in the Bar Ka'heli codices that he encountered the concept of the *shed*. And it's a new idea, one that hasn't filtered into general Gnostic scholarship because the texts haven't been released even for general scholarly study yet."

"But Holcomb's seen them?" Becker asks.

"Jack's father is the director of the National Museum's Middle Eastern Studies archive. Jack has advanced degrees in archaeology, anthropology and linguistics. He has, in other words, the right sorts of connections and the right educational background to have been included in the initial round of translation and study. The military apparatus supported his research since it could feasibly provide further insights into the psychology of the New Mes theater...and because he managed to convince them that Mikhail Brezhnaya was more Gnostic than Dispensationalist."

Becker nods his understanding. "Go on. What did he find that was so interesting?"

"What he found was a strain of Gnostic thought that was unprecedented, unhinted, tied to older religious impulses and cult practices than anyone had previously established or even imagined. The traditional view of the Gnostic movement was that it was a fairly organic eruption of theological thought centered in the Middle East in the first century of the common era. It was the logical outcome of ancient Judaism, burgeoning Christianity, Egyptian tradition and newer Roman religious structures all brushing shoulders, all thrown together in a very dense and thoughtful social milieu. The flashpoint for drawing all of these ingredients together was this amazing new idea of a god cast into the form of man, who is murdered by men, then ascends back into heaven for the remission of human sin. A god who said, my blood will make you pure, you can be resurrected like me and one day you will rise to meet me.

"Well, this was electrifying, this notion that we could be like gods, that the only thing holding us back was the dark and sinful and animal nature of our own bodies. That our flesh is evil, something to be thrown off like a tattered coat. And like any new religious idea, it created problems with the established ideas, most notably, the Jewish creation myth that the Hebrews and the early Christians both held in common. After all, every good Jew and every young Christian knew that God had created the world, had created mankind from the dust of the ground and had pronounced all of creation to be *good*. How could the flesh be good if we needed to cast it off in order to be like God, you see?"

"My grandmother raised me to be a good Southern Baptist," Becker snaps impatiently. "Of course I see."

"The early Gnostics played with this idea that the flesh was evil. If the body was what kept us from being with God, and the body was made from the dust of the earth, from mud, then there must be something wrong with the physical world itself. All of creation must be wrong, tainted, evil. But if creation is evil, how could God

have pronounced it to be *good*?"

"Troublesome, indeed," Becker says.

"The Gnostic solution was an ascetic escape from the world and from the body. Anything that gave the body pleasure was rejected. Anything that made the body suffer or that eliminated the individual's ties to earth and society and all the distractions of daily life became good. They believed that this gradual process of denial would purify the soul and make the believer eligible to receive intellectual revelations of the unknowable God. Minimize the distractions and focus on the divine, right? This is an elegant bit of reasoning, except it didn't deal with the fundamental error perceived in the creation myth. That required a much more radical shift in thought, though it was not one that the Gnostic leadership was unwilling to make.

"Understand that the early Gnostics were a loose amalgamation of Christians, pagans and Jews all crammed into a mind-bogglingly small chunk of Mediterranean coastline. The traditional Hebrew holy land, in fact. The Christians are already teaching by this time that the Jews have been disinherited because they rejected the coming of the Messiah. The pagans have always rejected Judaism out of hand because--well, frankly because the Jews have a historical reputation for being something of a pain in the ass both culturally and militarily. The obvious answer for the non-Jewish Gnostics was to reject the validity of the Torah as a reliable source of knowledge. They argued that the God of the Torah, the God of Genesis, the God of the Jews--Yahweh--wasn't really God at all, but a blind and deceived being who only believed himself to be God.

"And they called this being Ialdabaoth."

"The same Ialdabaoth responsible for the creation of this *shed*," Becker interjects, grunting. "So what is it, Ray?"

But Ray waves him off. "I'm getting to that. In this new creation myth, the true God has no contact with mankind at all. He resides in a great heavenly unknown called the *pleroma*, in perfect and non-physical unity with himself. Part of him, what the Gnostics called *Pistis Sophia*, what the Jews call *Shek-hinah*, separates itself from the *pleroma* and casts its divine reflection of the plastic waters of chaos--formless matter--which exists outside the realm of God. The light on the water spontaneously generates Ialdabaoth, and having been conceived, Ialdabaoth determines that he is the only being in the universe, the highest being, God. It's Ialdabaoth who creates the world, doing what gods have always done. And because it was fundamental to his nature that he was accidental, that he was separated from the *pleroma* and the Godhead, everything he manufactures is also irrevocably separated from God. This separation is what the Gnostics termed 'evil'.

"After awhile, God realizes what's going on, that Ialdabaoth has made the earth and the universe and mankind, and because he also realizes that part of him is responsible for this chain of events, he disperses into the chaos and into the human vessels sparks of divine light. Souls by which we might communicate with him, by which we might redeem our separation, our evil. He also points out to Ialdabaoth his error and his arrogance in usurping the role of divinity."

Becker nods. "Which, if I learned anything from having to read Milton at university, did not make him very happy."

"Exactly. By this time, Ialdabaoth had a whole hierarchy of power in place. Demigods and archons, sub-creation contractors and demonic figures, and way down the chain of command, he had human beings, whom he had created to worship him. God was trying to take his subjects away. Ialdabaoth made it his everlasting task to deceive as many people as he could, to keep us all mired in deception so that we did not ascend to the Godhead. So that we did not recognize the divine spark inside our jars of clay."

"Which is fine," Becker agrees easily enough. "Except that it doesn't tell me anything about how we ended up

with a dead kid on sub-Deck Omicron. It doesn't explain anything about the *shed*."

"But it does lead us right to the threshold, because what it sets up is a notion of duality inherent in all living things. Flesh and spark, body and soul, metaphors for a separation from God that exists because of our embodiment. The Gnostics teach us that duality is evil, because the Godhead is perfect unity. Every level of creation below the Godhead is increasingly degraded. This is where Holcomb's discoveries come into play.

"The Bar Ka'heli material is significant because it illuminated the reactionary viewpoint of the Jewish Gnostics in a way Nag Hammadi did not. As the Dead Sea Scrolls exposed scholarship to an almost unknown mainstream sect of Judaism called the Essenes, Bar Ka'heli revealed the theology of the persecuted sects of Jewish Gnostics, whose voices had largely disappeared from the historical record.

"Jack came across a manuscript called *The Seventh Revelation of Ahriman*, which is interesting, since 'Ahriman' is an Arab name rather than a Jewish one. Our boy Ahriman was, in fact, a converted Jew who brought to the table a vast knowledge of traditional Persian, Mesopotamian and Egyptian mythology. He's the Jewish answer to the Christian Magi who leave their pagan traditions to worship the true religion, providing it with a learned stamp of credibility. In his revelation, Ahriman claims to have been given a vision of an cosmogonical event not covered by the mainstream Gnostic creation myth.

"In Ahriman's interlude, Ialdabaoth does not reject the Godhead. Instead of rebellion, he repents his errors and his arrogance. He places himself in service to the Godhead, and he recognizes what a great evil he has perpetrated by inflicting duality upon the world. And having renounced his usurped power, he gathers his assorted archons and demigods and assistants together and tries to make amends. He tries to erase duality. So he creates a final race of beings, grand and powerful things fashioned from the substance of chaos itself, without any set physicality, pure consciousness capable of manipulating matter without being formed of matter. It is a Promethean impulse, not to steal fire from the gods in this case, but to return it to them. The redemption of duality through sacrifice.

"What he devises is the *shed*, creatures of stunning power and beauty, unrivalled beings in the hierarchy of mortal creation, perfect--and imbued with the fundamental understanding, the instinct, that they are the inheritors of the world. To the *shed*, humanity is anathema; humanity has usurped their rightful place in creation. Humanity is, in fact, an abortion that refuses to stop breathing."

Becker rubs at his forehead, processing all that Ray has said. He watches Nomar scuttle across the tabletop and begin to amuse himself with the remains of his meal, picking at chunks of fat with his paws and nibbling at their edges.

He says, "If we assume that Brezhnaya and our killer both had access to this information somehow, that is, if they knew about the mythological history of the *shed*, what would lead them to believe that they could control such entities? The *shed* were made to destroy us."

Ray exhales loudly. "This is where it starts to get a little complicated."

"Oh, it *starts* to get complicated. Great!"

"Look, the problem with Ialdabaoth's attempt at redemption is that he wasn't aware that the Godhead had already made provision for redeeming humanity. God had already seeded us with the divine spark, as legitimized our inheritance of the physical world. In other words, even though the creation itself is tainted, God makes it legitimate--this is how Ahriman justified the Torah. So Ialdabaoth, realizing that he has unwittingly placed himself once again at odds with the Godhead, goes back to his pits of creation and tinkers with the *shed* a bit more. He can't make them creatures of duality like men, because that would be imposing on the will of the Godhead to justify them as well. So instead, he removes some of essential stuff that make

them independent entities. He makes them subject to humanity, limits them in such a way that they retain their immense power, but their will can be guided by men. They can be enslaved, controlled, kept in check. What controls them is blood. Blood as some sort of input parameter. The *shed* can be understood as neutral memes. Animated, yes. Thinking, yes. Supernatural, yes. But also vulnerable to outside control if the proper rites are observed. They become receptacles for instruction, neither good nor evil, but subroutines of a program intimately bound up with creation. Brezhnaya, for example, was simply plugging in the parameters of his choice and hitting the execute key. After that, the program would run as it had been instructed and heedless of the consequences. It is not the best solution to the *shed* problem, but it is manageable, and it's all Ialdabaoth can do because he is either unwilling or unable to destroy completely the things he has made."

"Which doesn't make them any less dangerous at all," Becker points out, "if they manage to fall into the wrong hands, like Mikhail Brezhnaya's, as we've seen."

Again, Ray remembers clearly the way Kev Whitfield *collapsed*, boneless. The wet and slopping sound his flesh made against the stone.

"Yes."

"And you believe this, Ray? You believe the things Jack Holcomb said?"

This is a vital question, one Ray has never been able to answer for himself, let alone to convince someone else. It's too radical, too fundamentally different from everything he has ever been taught to accept as true. Normal men relegate *shed* and their complementary mythology to mental files marked "Creepy, but Irrelevant" and/or "Useless Paranormal Trivia". Preferably, mental files that are locked, buried, only accessed on impenetrably dark nights hemmed in by a thick pine forest when they're clustered around a roaring campfire with a troop of too-big-for-their-knickers Boy Scouts.

All this, of course, leads him roundabout to musty reflections on Jack Holcomb himself. Jack Holcomb the virgin LT, who knew nothing about actual combat, who talked deeply and intelligently of subjects arcane and occult, who for two weeks in the desert kept one hand over the space between his neck and chest like there was something dangling there and the other on the butt of a Russoturk assault rifle which he field stripped with expert care every morning so it wouldn't clog with sand. Holcomb wasn't a normal LT, despite how Ray wanted to characterize him. He didn't have the earnest idiocy of a puppy with poor bladder control. Not earnest at all, but rather intense in a vaguely scary way. He was squared away, at least theoretically, as close to being squared away as you could get without having been in a combat situation. He didn't freak out in hostile territory. He didn't cling to Ray like he couldn't take care of himself. He'd accepted advice and guidance, but done his fair share of sentry duty while Ray slept and offered salient suggestions like he had a map of the terrain wedged behind his eyeballs. Holcomb had been a soldier in the field, which was high praise in those days, and a large part of the reason they'd made it back to camp alive.

Jack Holcomb believed. He wouldn't have been mad if he didn't, at least not mad in the way Ray knew him to be.

But what does Ray believe? Even now, even after Ba'dai, it's impossible to tell.

"I know the *shed* exist because I've seen one," he says. "But what they are really, I don't think even Jack knew at the time. When he called them *shed*, he seemed to be referencing a whole mythological metaphor that he had devised in and around Ahriman's text, for which Ahriman's *gnosis* was a key to understanding. *Shed* is actually a Hebrew word, the equivalent of the Greek *daimon*."

"Demons?" Becker growls, stiffening.

"Not like that. Not the way we conceptualize them now. Middle Eastern cultures had a much more dynamic view of the supernatural than Westerners have. They didn't spend as much time wrestling with the problem of the existence of evil. That's almost exclusively a side effect of Christian theology.

"Ahriman didn't wrestle with it, except as a reaction to Gnostic anti-Semitism, because Satan and demonology didn't really exist in the Jewish or the Arab culture. The Hebrew word for evil, and the understanding that went with it, was *hasatan*, 'adversary'. Two of the Bible's oldest stories, the one in Job and the story of Balaam, feature prominent appearances by angelic beings: Balaam who is stopped on the way to a ritualized cursing of the children of Israel by an angel; Job who is tested by Satan after the devil and God have a confab in heaven about what a great and upright man Job is. In both tales, the word used to describe the divine agent is *hasatan*. In the Balaam story, we accept the angel of God as being a good guy, an angel, because he's preventing evil from being done to God's chosen people. But Job is a more troubling issue because the *hasatan* is almost chummy with God. He's not Big Evil Guy plotting the overthrow of heaven, but a free agent wandering around between earth and the celestial throne calling God's attention to things of interest. Doing, in other words, exactly what God had designed him to do. What does God do when confronted with the piety of Job? He sends out the *hasatan* to give Job a hard time. He programs the *hasatan* with a mission to test his faithful servant. He makes an adversary where one did not exist and would not have acted adversarially except where it had been instructed to do so.

"Christians decided that this wasn't a very flattering view of God, that God wasn't in the business of doing bad things to good people. To think that he might didn't make them feel very cozy and comforted despite the fact that God had sent his very own son down to earth to get murdered by ingrates. So they changed the article from 'an' to 'the' and made *hasatan* a proper noun and gave both themselves and God an Adversary worthy of capitalization who could screw things up on his own, of his own will, and generating a multitude of nasty theological knots in the process. They made armies of angels who could do no evil and demons who could do no good and cast all of human history as a war focused around getting as many human beings on your side as you possibly could. That we'd decide a war in heaven was really all about us as human beings is probably more instructive about human nature than it is about God.

"But Jews understood that angels and demons were the same types of entities who drew individualized definition from the mission to which they'd been assigned. If Yahweh gave them helpful-to-humans parameters, they were angels; if he gave them hostile parameters because the Jews or one of their neighbors were getting out of line, they were 'adversaries' designed to bring their targets back into right standing with God. There was no supernatural evil, just divine guidance that looked good or bad depending on your perspective. At the end of the day, God did what God wanted to do, and you either believed he did it for a good reason and went to bed happy that the universe was in order, or you accepted the other option, that it was all random and purposeless and you lived completely at the whim of an insane Deity determined to keep you in the throes of an existential crisis.

"Ahriman is also drawing on a long history of Arabian mythology, on *djinn*'s, who share this neutral meme design in their original conception. Supernatural beings with immense power who help lads like Aladdin gain their rightful place in the world through the service of wishes, but for every Aladdin, there's a cautionary tale of some yabbo who tries to use a genie for evil and gets caught up in a semantic web of wish language that ultimate becomes his undoing because like a computer program, genies have this annoying tendency to be literal in their execution. Justice comes to men who are good; judgment to men who are evil. The *djinn* behaves according to the types of commands the individual inputs.

"The big knock on Middle Eastern deities these days is that that they were so whimsical. They were unreliable, wandering about causing trouble and getting into messes and having internecine wars that generated no real resolution but always led to human suffering in one way or another. Ahriman and his contemporaries didn't see it this way. They didn't have a philosophical framework that pointed everything out in terms of good and evil. What they had was neutral memes wandering about doing divinely inspired things.

You didn't try to stop evil so much as keep from attracting the attention of a god or gods who might decide you needed a little adversarial working over for mucking about in their business of running things. If you were so unfortunate as to gain supernatural interest, the one thing you had to keep in mind above all else was that you were dealing with an emissary of your God. Not a bad guy, not some evil wannabe determined to destroy God's plans and wreck the universe, but God himself--or herself, depending on your cultural orientation--testing your piety.

"This is the core idea: that angels, demons, djinn can bring help or harm depending on how you use them. Always, always, always, extreme caution must be used in dealing with them. Wise men like Solomon can control demons, even Beelzebul, King of Demons, because he understands this inherent peril. Over time, all of these experiences with the supernatural are transformed. Angels become good guys, demons become bad guys. We develop methods for prayer, rituals for delineating the bounds of our interaction with supernatural beings, magicks and words of power to contain and control them. All of these beings become tempered and sanitized by time and disbelief, homogenized into something safe, something that could be dealt with in a fashion other than simple, blind terror.

"But in the beginning, before we child-proofed the supernatural, there was just the *shed*. Holcomb was certain that the *shed* was the protomyth from which all these other ideas derived. Beelzebul is a *shed*; Michael the Archangel is a *shed*; the Devourer is one. The *shed* is neither angel nor demon nor djinn, he is all three at once. He is dark matter and irreducible universal algorithms; he is the pulse of Being, fundamental creation stuff--a diagram of the structure of the mind of God."

Becker chews his lip for several seconds in silence, then says, "Ray, whoever killed that kid did not do it to test our piety. This is not anyone interested in understanding the mind of God."

Ray realizes he had begun to hunch his shoulders, and there's a line of aches down the middle of his back as though his muscles have clenched themselves to his bones. He closes his eyes, inhales deeply, then opens them again.

The *shed*, what Ray believes was the *shed*, whatever you might choose to call it, was supposed to be New Mes. It is not *Paraclete*. It should not part of this investigation, not bound up to the corpse of the boy, except as salient background.

"I don't know why," Ray says slowly.

Becker only nods. "I don't know either, but I do know that my good, God fearing, Bible thumping Baptist grandmother wouldn't have given much of a squat about *shed* and genies and what old Solomon was doing with anybody other than his idolatrous concubines. She most certainly wouldn't have cared for the exegesis of some johnny-come-lately Arab Jew trying to rewrite the book of Genesis. What would have attracted her attention was the idea that bad people are using nefarious methods to commit the second oldest sin in the history of humanity, that being murder of the Cain and Abel variety, and seeing to it that justice is brought to the perpetrators. What I know is that murder never happens for no reason at all. Whether it's done with a knife in a back alley or a gun on the lawn of the White House or some supernatural free agent in the Persian hinterland, there's always somebody behind it with a grudge, or an attitude or a score to settle. Somebody wields the weapon, and they've always got a why or a wherefore. Murder always comes down to the why of it.

"So you tell me, Ray, why was that kid murdered? Why now? Why here? Why in precisely that way, when it wouldn't mean anything to anyone who didn't know what you know?"

All the Chief is doing is stating the obvious, the exact thing Ray has been trying to ignore.

"They're trying to send me a message," Ray says.

"But why would they do that?"

"Because they want me to know that they know what happened, that they know about the *shed*."

"Which means they know a lot more about you than you know about them. The victim here is only peripherally that boy in the storage bin. The intended victim, the target, is you."

"Sure."

"Who else knows about what happened to you at Ba'dai, Ray?"

It's not something he has to think about. There are no survivors to count off on his fingers. "No one except Jack Holcomb--who has his reasons for not telling anyone anything at all. Every other person who knew or has been told about Ba'dai is dead."

This was an obvious setback for Becker. His features knuckle thoughtfully. "You're certain?"

"I watched my entire squad die. Of Brezhnaya's Dispensationalists, anyone who might have had indirect knowledge should have been rounded up and eliminated years ago."

"What about colleagues? Other people like me who you might have told when you were too drunk to keep your mouth shut?"

Ray laughs grimly. "Dead."

"You're certain?"

"The CIU doesn't make mistakes when it comes to certifying the loss of field assets. When the agency says you're dead, there's no coming back."

"That makes for an interesting problem, then." Becker says this the way one of Persian king Darius's generals might when confronted with a horde of Scythians, gold bedecked and poisoned arrow tips glistening beneath the sun, rushing on horseback up from the steppes. "Someone is trying to send you a message, my friend. And I suspect they'll keep trying to send it until you get it or until we catch him."

Ray says: "So, okay."

It's the sort of meaningless, syntactic noise meant to indicate that they'd smashed into a brick wall. Becker peers at him as though he expects answers to spring from Ray's forehead as fully formed and jaw-droppingly voluptuous as a Greek goddess. But Ray has nothing left to give him.

"I've got to get Nomar back to the shop and start running tests on the tissue samples taken from the victim before he crams his storage compartments with the remains of your dinner. Maybe I'll learn something that will get us moving along the right track."

Becker sees this for what it is, an excuse to escape. "What do you want me to do with the two Marines?"

"You've cleared them for reassignment?"

"Temporarily. Until we hit New Holyoke."

Some good news, at least. He'll feel much more competent to deal with this situations with Marines to back

him up. "Send them around to my quarters tomorrow afternoon. I should have something for them to do by then. No, scratch that. If I leave it up to them to find me, they'll take days to hook up." He knows that much about Marines from having been one. "I'll pick them up when I'm ready for them. What you can do in the meantime is see about getting me assigned to a new berth, something with more space and closer to the Garden Level. On the Garden Level, in fact."

"What, you want me to just kick one of the fares out into the concourse?"

"If that's what it takes. I'll also have a list of equipment and computing essentials for you by tomorrow morning at the latest. I'll need those things delivered as soon as possible."

Becker starts to protest, then waves himself off. "I'll see what I can do."

Ray has already squeezed himself out of the booth. He prompts Nomar to follow with a pair of quick slaps against his thigh. "I'll let you know if I find anything. First thing."

"That's good, as long as you remember to act on it when the time comes."

The Chief is smiling, but Ray stops in front of him, serious. "I don't know what's going on, Rich. I don't know why this thing is erupting out of my past and what it has to do with me, but I'll catch this scumbag. I promise you that, and he'll explain to me face to face what he wanted me to know that was so important it was worth Micah Uytdehaage's life."

Chapter Five

So now he's puttering, which is the equivalent of some fallen angel, headlong skydive from Grace as far as Ray is concerned. When he was recruited into the CIU, he was a battle weary, wide-eyed, five by five sort of combat veteran. He stomped through his days like there were Russoturk necks underfoot. Good times weren't technically good times unless he was shooting at someone or getting uproariously drunk and pummeling someone else who happened to be on his side of the demilitarized zone. His average after action report cost the Marine Corps twenty-four pencils, two typewriters and a terminal monitor, just because he required the violence to think clearly.

The CIU spooks showed up in Wadi Wadi looking like bad imitations of Marines (i.e. they had the clothes; they had the gear; they had the righteous, honed killing edge, but when you looked at them, there was a vacuity to their gaze, a disconcerting detachment that suggested their righteous edge might have been gained in tasks less savory than gutting opposing combat forces in legitimate military exercises). It was obvious from an even casual perusal that they were not pleasant guys. They were the kind of folk you suspect are only being nice to you because they want something that you have, but taking it seems like too much effort, even though putting up with your whining and crying afterwards is the hard cap extent of your puerile resistance capabilities against them and whatever it is they want to do to you. They were very slick, very badass. Mucho cool and menacing.

There were two of them, Minos and Thrash, made up to look like dapper Tac Sergeants and they buttonholed him in the PX where he was picking up some razor blades and scanning the magazine rack for this month's girlie mags. They tried the whole impressive *we have a proposition for you from your government* spiel, which he blew off with the argument that he'd already been propositioned by his government, and having been screwed more than his handful share of times, he was considering entertaining other offers at the moment. Bad pay, poor working conditions, lousy scenery *and* he had to pay for his own head jobs, thank you very much. Then they went to the *life of excitement and adventure* backup, sounding not unlike the recruitment videos the chubby draft sergeants paraded around Ray's Indiana high school right before graduation. (Pick your service before the service picks you!) Ray preferred backgammon and had just taken up origami, and he told them so. By the time the three of them had gotten themselves wedged into the narrow checkout aisle to watch Ray pay for his purchases, he suspected they were finally gearing up for the hard sell techniques. He more than suspected they were about to divulge that they were, in fact, officers of distinguished rank masquerading as NCO's for the singular purpose of screwing with him and/or testing his level of Marine dedication and/or they were actually about *this* close to ordering him to this devastatingly attractive new duty station whether he liked it or not.

All the necessary papers, they seemed to suggest, had already been signed, copied and filed in his absence.

Ray was not in the mood to take orders from spooks, officers or not, and he didn't like the fact that they had followed him through the entire PX, so before they could tell him something that will put him in hock to the Uniform Code of Military Justice (like the fact that they are, in fact, officers and he's required to listen respectfully and then obey their commands), he dropped his fresh packet of razor blades and his tit magazine and proceeded to stomp their asses from the candy aisle all the way back to Personal Hygiene Products. Having successfully avoided their recruitment overtures, Ray picked up his personal items and returned to the temporary barracks...

...where they caught up with him, and slipped a cold and nasty auto-injector against his arm and shot him full of a temporary nerve toxin that left him both queasy and paralyzed. They stood over his bed by moonlight, their faces patchwork quilts of bruise and scratch and swelling welts, and said things like *you're an active guy; you like the hard life. More important, you like kicking people around and stopping bad guys from doing the types of things that bad guys like to do. We're offering you the opportunity to do exciting and interesting crap like that every day for the rest of your life, okay?* They gave him some examples of his past enjoyment of this

type of activity, just enough to show that they were fluent with the language of his personnel file. They said the pay was great, the working conditions top notch, the benefits outstandingly better than anything anyone else was offering, and even though you *still* had to pay for your own head jobs, at least you could comfortably afford them.

Ray was impressed not at all by their arguments and incentives, but he was floored by their ability to sneak into a fully occupied NCO barracks in the middle of an armed camp and disable a squared away combat Marine before he'd even had a proper chance to rouse himself. As a man who made his living by creatively and skillfully killing other men, this was a currency of the most fascinating sort.

By the time they said *and it's never dull*, like that was supposed to be the big, clenching appeal (rather than what it was, to wit, an indication that someone should look into terminating their staff psychologist for incompetency), Ray was saying something unhiply emotive like *you had me from hello*.

But here he is, a few short years removed, puttering around the shop, surrounded by terminals and computer equipment and assorted, disembodied drone components, looking to all the world like he is some sort of tech geek, like he is the type of guy who could code a complex DNA sequencer and database-match compiler meshed through a self-developed bitstream interpreter interface between the drones' internal SQUAL metalanguage and *Paraclete's* state of the art DLQ+ virtual sensing medical computing environment. It's a good thing he and Nomar have the shop to themselves, otherwise he'd probably have to maim someone just on general principle. Nomar has gone into peeved mode from having a data output jack rammed up his anal port for the second time in as many days, and has retreated beneath a desk where he has something solid against his back and can, if Ray gets out the jack again, use his claws against assorted soft tissues in an effort to convey his displeasure. The fact that he is not an actual rat and should not be disturbed by standard data transfer procedures does not seem to have occurred to his processing array, which Ray finds to be an issue of marginal interest from a programming standpoint.

Ray is sitting at his workstation watching meaningless data analysis stream across his monitor while it searches for hits against the med and criminal databases stored in the ship's datacore. He's refined the search parameters a dozen times already with unsatisfactory results after he has filtered for the kid's recorded DNA profile (Parameter argument logic/response technique where unsatisfactory = zero records returned. Alternately: zilch, zip, nada, the dreaded empty set, no data, etc. See alternate references under: Waste of Time, Sleep Deprivation to No Ascertainable Purpose and Tasks Not Specified in Job Description).

The cascade of digits in process is vaguely hypnotic, and Ray keeps flipping back to memories of Jack Holcomb, which is something he most definitely does not want to do. Because he can't help but think about the way Holcomb always kept one hand over his chest, right where his dog tags would dangle. Only, it wasn't his tags he was feeling for, but the meticulous stone ring he wore on a chain, the one he'd crafted from descriptions and hints in ancient manuscripts to be just like the ones hoary old King Solomon of Biblical fame had used in legend to subjugate demons and djinn and slave labor them out to various projects culminating in the construction of the Holy Temple.

Exactly like the ones, Holcomb reveals to Ray beneath a starry New Mes night and in a breathless and trembling voice, *precisely cognate to the ones* he has had surgically fused to the bones of his skull, grafted around his femur and tibia, implanted into his pelvis. He laughs, grim with knowledge, and says over and again: *the shed is wrong about that, my friend. I won't slip; I won't make a mistake or let down my guard. Im-fucking-possible. He doesn't know about modern medicine, does he? He hasn't kept up with time, with technology. There's no way to trip me up, to steal my talisman and turn me into some doddering Solomon with a shamir in my staff of power. Bring your shiddah veshiddot! You thought Solomon was an asshole? You don't know the first thing about me, but I know everything about you.*

What was the difference between paranoia and insanity? That might be something he'd have to look up.

You're a good soldier, Marlowe. You know everything there is to know about the currency of the physical world--violence. There's no fault in that. We've trained you to be a ruthless killing machine, and you've taken to your lessons like a prodigy, plain and simple. But you need to get this through your head, buddy. You're not just operating in a physical arena. Not anymore. You see the shed, you read the books I've read and seen the forces I've seen--forces beyond the ken of simpleminded man--and you've got one of two choices: you ignore what you know to be the truth and wait for it to destroy you, or you dive in, you learn, you acquire the currency of the supernatural world--knowledge. Once you take that step, once you accept what you've seen as truth rather than illusion or delusion or psychotic break, Marlowe, then the world becomes a totally different place. The horizon takes on a depth you never imagined. The universe is a far vaster and stunningly more nuanced place than you have heretofore cared to believe. Once you know, you can't ever go back to a place of not knowing, only forward, only better warned and better armed. You'll see. One day you'll say to yourself, "that Jack Holcomb with his stone rings inscribed in Sanskrit and Arabic and forgotten Hittite, that Jack Holcomb knew what he was talking about, didn't he? He had his shit together, yessir. He had knowledge. Magus Fucking Profundus". Then you'll be calling me, asking me what to do to save your ass. No shame in that, Marlowe. When the student is ready, the teacher appears.

He assiduously avoids thinking about Ba'dai again. He's all but purged that impulse for another five to seven years by spilling his guts to Becker. But this doesn't stop him from coming back to the *shed* with troubling frequency. As he sees it, he is logically required to dismiss the argument that the boy was murdered in the fashion that he was out of coincidence. Carving out a child's organs is not standard homicidal technique. It has been done, certainly, by individuals with interests that did not intersect with ancient Middle Eastern occult rites. But he has a hard time believing that this type of child serial killer would randomly end up berthed on a starship with one of the few people in the world who might be tempted to mistake his psychosis for ritual.

The same reasoning applies to bumbling, *shed* summoning acolytes who lacked the patience to wait until they reached the less monitored frontier environment of New Holyoke.

As Becker had said, someone was trying to send him a message. Someone in a position to know what he had seen.

Someone who also knew about the *shed*.

Well met, brother. I think that we shall meet again.

But it is a good idea to stop there, to not follow that thread to its conclusion. Better not to dwell on other things, rumors, whispers from Wadi Wadi that reached him only as desiccated corpses of truth, sanitized of their vibrancy because he received them at a dozen degrees of separation.

Staff Sergeant So-and-so from F Company reporting that a night patrol did not return as scheduled, says he dispatched a recon team to locate them after several hours. Recon team walks the grid and discovers a bundle of corpses stashed in a windblown arroyo. Corpses with a distinctly *chewed* look to them.

Unsubstantiated rumors that pilots had stumbled across abandoned tent compounds that looked an awful lot like those of bedouin Sheik Loyal to the Allied Cause, their herds wandering listlessly, untended.

Forward listening posts gone silent, the troops deserted--always at night.

Filtered tales of Allied Kurd forces laying down their arms and vanishing into the remote mountain wilderness, leaving cryptic messages that they would only fight that which could be killed. METOC sends investigators to look into the possibility of a newly formed, ultra secret branch of Russoturk special forces wreaking havoc on local support.

New Mes became a very creepy place in the months before he shipped off to CIU, and on moonless nights out in the field, at odd hours when he was supposed to be setting up ambushments for tomorrow's Russoturk convoys, Ray would think about Jack Holcomb and wonder what he made of all the bizarre rumors. Was he running around Washington trying to convince senators and cabinet members to beware the *shed*? Did he sometimes yearn for moonless nights, when there wasn't the chance that he would see strange shadows against the argent limned sky?

Push it away, Ray tells himself. It's a mind game, one he thought he had left behind.

Or had he run away from it? Had he embraced the CIU because it promised to put him on an interminable series of starship cruises, to eject him into the deepness of space as far from New Mes as human habitation ranged?

Did Ialdabaoth create the entire universe, or just the earth? That was a point Holcomb had never made quite clear enough.

So he stops thinking about New Mes and *sheds* and metaphysics. He can do that, except what's left to him--the dead kid--is somehow worse.

He's been at it for about three hours, and despite all the events he has jammed into this day, it's still early. Just after midnight Greenwich according to the ship's chron. He's been up since way too early, and he's aware that he should be getting tired any time now, should probably just plan on falling over with his fatigue and considering himself lucky if he doesn't fall so hard he breaks his face. But in the quiet of the shop when his mind isn't actively engaged, he's developed an agitating tendency to get all shaky. He has to concentrate on the keypad to keep his fingers from rattling off strings of incoherent letters and digits.

It's something he's been through before, too many times to count, in fact. A minor case of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, acute in nature. Good Marines measure their level of combat effectiveness by PTSD episode count more than by medals, commendations and field promotions.

Little Micah Uytdehaage is not a combat fatality, but he registers the same way in Ray's mind. He flashes in and out of Ray's forebrain with a music video's stab and cut photographic intensity. His eviscerated corpse. His glassy and staring eyes. His gangly, purple limbs. Ray has the boy's sweet corpse smell up his nostrils, a constant sensory companion, though he knows he's just imagining it. The subconscious picks at horror like it's a scab. Any decent military psychologist will tell you that this is a good thing; it's an indicator that your coping mechanisms are on-line and humming feverishly over the task of putting the event behind you.

Ray has had to rush to the head three times in the last two hours to vomit. He supposes that this is a coping mechanism, too.

He doesn't feel like he's coping. He feels like he's being eaten alive.

The traditional Marine response to stress on this scale of magnitude is to round up some similarly stressed buddies, find a bar frequented by military types and spend several hours getting astoundingly drunk. Additional therapy comes in the form of locating other military individuals attached to a different branch of the service (e.g., Air Force guys) who seem to have not encountered a combat level of stress induced psychological damage and thumping on them until they can begin to empathize.

Ray suspects that Commander Sorensen would not appreciate his taking this self-actualization tack, so he forces himself to break down the ass-kicking impulse to its base elements in an attempt to find an adequate substitute. It occurs to him that the whooping of USAF butts may be more an artifact of the drinking than of coping, which leads him to believe that drinking itself might also be incidental to the healing process. What

remains when he's done filtering out unnecessary behavior patterns and general Marine tradition is the naked concept of identification. Mutual understanding without words.

He needs to be close to someone who can share his pain.

This is, of course, a sufficiently profound psychological revelation to justify making an odd hours social call on Emma Whiston.

Even with an underdeveloped sense of propriety (cultivated by years of hanging around with testosterone enhanced males, and followed by a few more years of elevating sneakiness and network footprint avoidance to the level of a fine art), Ray comprehends that it would be a bad idea to hack the ship's passenger manifest for the unpreferred address of the Whiston suite. Civilized people would consider such behavior either unforgivably rude or stalkingly threatening.

And there are other, more socially conscionable ways of gathering that information.

One of the features of the system terminals on the Garden Level is a public database of ship schematics searchable by deck and passenger name which will, if properly instructed, produce a hardcopy map where you are signified by an X and the recommended route of travel to the specified destination is a dotted red line. Built into this nifty little program is a courteous bit of code that pings the private in-room network of the individual for whom you have just searched to alert them to the possibility of visitors in their immediate future (and/or give them the opportunity to alert security that so-and-so with this shipsys id, who I happen to find personally offensive, is on his way to my rooms and I'd like to have him intercepted before he arrives). This code goes by the name of Distant Doorbell and is one of those innocuous bits of programming that took its creator all of about ten minutes from idea to debugging and rewarded his ingenuity with something on the order of ten billion dollars within six months of the product's release.

It has since become the minimum standard of decent manners on starships throughout human space.

By the time he reaches the Garden Level to place his obligatory ping, Ray has showered off the corpse smell that probably didn't exist for anyone but himself, changed into corpse-free khaki and passed several agonizing minutes in front of a mirror trying on facial expressions that conveyed an approximation of human warmth and concern, tinged with a sort of Oh-my-God-I-just-heard consternation. (Somewhat disconcertingly, this looks almost exactly like his *I'll give you three dollars American if you'll have dirty sex with me* face, only with less eyebrow and a touch more goggle. He alternates between the two several times until he's certain the compassionate one will hold its form with the rigidity of cement.) The map generated by the kiosk terminal bears the title THIS IS HOW YOU GET TO EMMA across the top in perkily obese green letters. The fact that it is six pages long, involves three separate elevators, four staircases and traverses roughly the entire lateral distance of the ship would have been intimidating for anyone not a member of the crew, and Ray suspects that this is might be intentional. It is a "Visitors NOT Welcome" sign hung out by individuals having just enough celebrity to be casually gawk-worthy or notorious enough to want to be left alone.

The Whiston suites are tucked six decks below the Garden Level in a bulbous protrusion grafted onto the original superstructure by design engineers specializing in aesthetics. It is a compound of twelve sprawling rooms with four public entrances, two private egresses with their own personal lift and an entry corridor that dead ends at the hatch to an exclusive emergency jettison pod. The failed illusion that *Paraclete* is something other than a military craft converted to passenger transport does not exist here in the space officially designated Iota Deck-D, where the D more than likely stood for *decadence*. Iota-D is a place of vibrant color and understated elegance, of rare wood panels and walls papered with textured earth tones, of crimson carpet, fresh flowers and dewdrop chandeliers. It is, in short, everything the Officers Lounge tries to be except for the

niggling absence of about a trillion dollars to burn.

And that's just the farking hallway.

Ray steps out of the lift feeling a bit breathless. He examines his watch for the tenth time in the last few minutes, but not until this moment has he bothered to consider that it really is almost one in the morning. That maybe whatever it is that brought him down here could wait until the morning, or next week or the day that falls right after "never" on the calendar. But this is a normal sort of freaking out for him, so he plunges ahead, just beginning to sweat and lifting his knees high with each step so the morass of the carpet won't establish a suction lock on his boots and strand him, paralyzed, out in the open.

Then there's the knottier problem of which door to hammer at. The map directs him only to the primary entrance, which appears dramatically too public upon actual inspection. It's a thing of chrome and technological gadgetry, with a secure lock keypad entry system. There's a high-res flatscreen embedded in wall to the left. At the moment it's projecting a vid image of the system messenger in kako-daimon mode--meaning that the door is locked and the messaging software routed to a recording device. There's either nobody home, or whoever happens to be inside isn't interested in talking to anyone not already on their side of the security.

Ray doesn't find this surprising given the circumstances, nor did he imagine that given the encounter with the Mr. Whiston of the household this morning that he'd have much luck getting at Emma via the front door in the first place. But with three other doors to choose from, knocking on the wrong one would be a tactical error.

Thus, the Distant Doorbell ping. And the follow-up ping the lift would have transmitted to the security system when it stopped on Iota-D.

But the rest relies on Emma being present and/or paying attention and/or astute enough to realize she should be waiting by the door in the middle of the (chronological) night to meet a man who still technically falls somewhere in the murky acquaintance range between cordial and complete stranger. It is a complex array of variables, none of which reflect positively on his foresight and mission planning skills. Of course, most of his traditional mission planning skills would have dictated kicking in all the doors he found closed, doing a lot of shouting and gun pointing and eventually bayoneting anyone who was not Emma so they couldn't raise a general alarm.

So this way is probably best.

Though he reserves the right to keep the shouting and stabbing as a viable Plan B.

But at the last, it doesn't matter. Before he can go digging through his pockets for makeshift edged weapons, there comes a hydraulic wheeze down the corridor to his left. A snooty kako-daimon avatar begins to express his displeasure in a tinny, offended voice at having the seal broken, but is cut off in mid-reprimand. From the farthest door, what would have been the door to the corner room if Iota-D hadn't been vaguely circular in its construction, Emma peers out, her round face and wide eyes emerging from the flat plane of the wall as though it is disembodied. A pale arm follows and she beckons to him without words. Ray strikes out toward her at an unmanly trot.

His hands are empty. He should have brought flowers or something. It would have been easy enough, since he has connections in the hydroponics section. He could have arranged *something* if he'd been thinking clearly--which he seems to be not doing now. Though it could also just be a lack of practice at this sort of thing. The last time he brought any woman flowers, he was eight years old carrying a bundle of discriminately selected wildflowers to his mother in the hospital right after she'd disgorged Robert Junior (a.k.a. "bobbin", "bobbo", "L'il B", "Roberta Jean", "punk-ass bee-yatch", depending on the speaker and the

circumstances).

And he thinks: *Is this a tryst? Is that what it is?* He's never been involved in a tryst, so he can't say for certain, but the possibility is both thrilling and alarming at once.

What am I doing?

A moment later he's inside; the door hisses closed behind him. The much abused kako-daimon announces in a hurt tone that portal integrity has been restored and tacks on a purely malicious notation that the security breach has been documented in the system log. There is a subtle *tsk!* in its voice which leads Ray to believe that software developers spend entirely too much time generating pseudo-human skins for their avatars when they should have been focusing on the fact that an average skilled hardware hacker could pop the security kernel in just under thirty seconds.

At this point, he decides it would be a good idea to stop the dervish whirling through his neural net before it makes him dizzy. He takes a deep breath, tries to concentrate.

He is such a giddy assclown.

But here's Emma, small and pale, luminous in blue silk capri pants and a short oriental robe wrapped about her. She hugs her arms against her chest, steps back to create some distance between them. Her lips are drawn together in a thoughtful pout and her eyes dart toward him, then away, considering the door. She seems to be straining forward, as though filtering the ether for voices Ray cannot hear.

Finally, she allows her shoulders to slump and offers him a relaxed and weary frown. Not unhappy, just bland, almost an absence of expression. "It seems I've been a bad influence, Mr. Marlowe. You've known me for two days, and here you are already behaving audaciously."

"I know. It's late, but you didn't strike me as the type of girl who put to bed early."

"I don't believe you know enough about me or my sleeping habits to make such a bold statement. How quickly I jump into bed might just surprise you."

She speaks without mischief, an innocent absence of intent. There's no play in her at all.

And Ray remembers that Micah Uytdehaage was not just victim to her, not just a carcass already cooling the first time she saw him. He winces at the thought, at its ugliness.

"Did I wake you?" Ray asks, a form of apology.

Emma shakes her head. "I was--No, not at all. It's dreadfully early for the young socialite, as you suggest."

"No, it's late. I should have been more considerate, waited until tomorrow."

This was a mistake. What had he been thinking?

"It's fine, really. I don't object to visitors. Not you, especially. But you didn't bring your rat with you, I see. I had conceived a notion that the two of you were inseparable."

"He's angry with me at the moment. I'm giving him space to brood."

She obviously doesn't know what to make of this, and stares at him with her lower lip caught in her teeth. He's

being nonsensical, of course. Everything is nonsensical. He hasn't had a clear and focused thought since he walked in the door.

"Why are you here, Ray?"

"I should have just called. Would you like me to go?"

"I knew it was you when the ping came through. I wouldn't have opened the door if I didn't want to see you."

Ray doesn't know what that means, not in this context. Just polite? Is this what good manners looks like?

Beyond Emma's shoulder is a short hallway. At the end is a door, slightly ajar, which he assumes must be her bedroom. It's a space that suits her, this room. Cream colored walls, abstract pastel prints, pale rugs over a white carpet. The furniture is soft, delicately constructed. Where there are flowers, the vases are clear, eggshell thin crystal and the petals pale. Mostly lilies and orchids with their green stalks trimmed by a practiced hand. There's a simplicity here, an uncluttered grace that is appealing not because it is spartan, but because it conveys a sense of subtle vibrancy--an inchoate potential for definition. Against the far wall is a suede sofa candlestick by a pair of standing lamps which cast pools of warm yellow light.

Ray reaches out and catches Emma's hand. He draws her across the room, and eases her down onto one end of the sofa. Ray sits on the far side, a field of neutral cushions between them. She watches him the entire time, and he wonders if she is as confused by his behavior as he is. He has never acted this way around a woman before. Never. And what it means, what it might mean, fills him with a curious mixture of exhilaration and aching, electric terror.

"Emma, you'll have to forgive me. I'm not thinking very clearly. I *know* I'm not acting with much coherence. I'm--I mean to say, I think I came because I needed to see that you were all right."

"Why wouldn't I be fine?" By syntax, it's a question, but she speaks it without curiosity. "Because of Micah," Ray says simply. "The boy from the Trust."

The name strikes her like a punch. She does not so much wilt as unhinge, her joints and muscles collapsing. She drops her chin until it rests against her breast, and all Ray can see is the top of her head.

But just for a moment.

With a jerk, she stiffens, lifts her head and sets her mouth in a firm, thin line. "News of a Whiston tragedy has always travels quickly. There must be morbid delight in our suffering."

"No, not at all." She doesn't understand, he realizes. She doesn't see any way he could know about Micah so soon, except as a recipient of a firestorm of gossip. Ugh. "It's not like you think. I was dragged into the investigation by Security Chief Becker this afternoon--to coordinate the drones, you understand. We use them to gather physical evidence to keep from contaminating the crime scene. Sometimes, it puts me in a position to hear privileged information." He gives her a grim, understanding expression to hide the lie he has just told. It feels oily to him, like cheap theatrical makeup poorly applied. "Chief Becker is going to play this one close. Murder reflects poorly on security's reputation."

"Murder," she echoes woodenly.

"I'm sorry, Emma."

She gazes away from him, an alabaster statue of grief. "I tucked him into bed last night, after coming home

from the theatre. You probably didn't know that. He had sneaked into the sitting room to read a picture book after the other children had fallen off. Amah had made it a special task of hers to teach him how to read before we reached New Holyoke, because it was a skill he would need, she said. Even frontiersmen should have an education. The development of human culture depends on it."

About what time, Ray almost asks, but stops the question before he asks. It's too obvious.

Treading gently. "Was that the last time you saw him?"

"Yes."

"And your brother? Did he see him after that, maybe some time this morning?"

"Not that he mentioned, but I haven't really spoken with Frederick since--" She pauses. "I mean, I've only spoken with Amah. She's the one who told me."

"Amah?"

"Our domestic. She's been with our family for years. She raised Frederick and me practically from the moment I was born, after mother became ill the first time. She has a special way with children."

It's enough. Even taking this much advantage of her is disgusting.

Ray reaches out to her, taking one of the hands she has folded into her lap. He squeezes it gently. "Are you all right?"

"I don't think that I am. Not at all."

"I'd worry if you thought you were."

"It was bad, wasn't it? I mean, they didn't just kill him, not accidentally or even gently. Amah wouldn't give me any details, any of the truth, except to say that he was dead. But I know it must have been terrible, because she would have said so otherwise. And when I tried to ask her more about it, to give me something to comfort the other children with, she sent me to my room like a little girl. She doesn't want me to know. She thinks she's protecting me. But I don't need protection; I need to *know*."

"Becker will catch whoever did this, I can promise you that."

Emma scowls, her eyes turn hard. "You're just like Amah."

"Maybe she's right. Not that you need protection, of course, but just that there are some things it's better not to know. You always hear people say that imagining is worse than the reality, no matter how horrible the truth might be. It's been my experience that the only people who say that are folks who have never seen anything truly horrible."

This concession seems to be enough. Emma blinks the anger out of her gaze. "You've seen terrible things before, haven't you? You've been a soldier."

"What makes you say that?"

"You talk like a Marine."

Without thinking, Ray winks. "You've known many Marines, Miss Whiston?"

"I have a Terran cousin with whom I'm very close who happens to be a career Marine, Mr. Marlowe," she replies archly.

Ray smiles softly. "I guess that's better than saying I remind you of your crusty old uncle or something. Yes, Emma, I was a Marine. Or I am a Marine. They don't actually let us retire, you know. They just put us on indefinite hiatus."

"And you served bravely in the desert, yes? Like all the other good Midwestern boys?"

"I did."

"You were no doubt very brave."

"No. The brave are the ones who come back in bags. I'm just feisty and clever and stubborn. Like a camel. The best way to survive in a hostile environment is always to emulate the natives."

"I'd rather imagine you as brave and lucky than camelish. A Lawrence of Arabia romance." She tilts her head toward him. "Does it bother you to talk about the desert?"

"Not in generalities." Which is true enough. "Generalities are better, in fact, if you want to keep your illusions of romance."

"But it was exciting, wasn't it?"

He laughs without humor. "In the military, excitement is a dirty word. We avoid all things exciting if possible."

"I don't believe that. I think your life must have been very exciting, but you don't want to tell me."

"Do you really want to know?"

"I do. I want to know all your secrets. Even the terrible ones."

"Are you always this blunt?"

She narrows her eyes at him. "You're avoiding the issue. Tell me what it was like."

"What it was like?" He doesn't know why this is so important to her, why she wants to know so badly. But he tells her--for no other reason than that she wants it. "Imagine what it would feel like to shiver constantly for a whole year if you can. Every second, every hour, every day, just shivering. That's what the New Mes combat zone is like."

Her brow furrows, as if she can't decide if he's teasing her. "I don't understand."

"That's why you should keep your illusions, your romance. They're much better."

Quietly. "Like with Micah."

"Exactly like that."

She sighs then, a deep and cleansing exhalation that seems to lift some of the weight bearing down on her. "I'm glad you came, even if the circumstances are awful. After this morning, I thought...well, I thought that you might not want to see me again. Frederick has a troubling tendency to alienate the men who interest me. He's very jealous of my virtue, I think. Or he feels like he has to protect the family reputation from unsavory individuals who might be less interested in me than in the Whiston assets."

Nah, he's just an asshole, Ray thinks, but does not say.

He has a number of things he wants to say now that His Man Freddy has been brought into the mix, most prominently, he wants to ask her *does he hit you* or less baldly *does he always get off by hurting you*, but this isn't the time. There might never be a right time, but he's slowly drawing near to an awareness that he wants there to be opportunities, at least. He would very much like to know her more intimately.

"I'm not after your money," he says, because it's obligatory at this point. "Not that you know me well enough to have any faith in that."

With a saucy curl of her lips, Emma returns, "Then it's my body you're after."

"Too honest for this stage of our--" What? Flirtation? Acquaintance? Relationship?

She spares him the necessity of a descriptor. "I see, you want to get to know me better, to deconstruct my behavior and determine what sort of woman I really am before you let your lust get carried away. Is that it?"

"Too mercenary."

"Then what? Oh, something Midwestern, I suppose. You just like my company and would like to see if it develops into a more permanent structure. You want to fall in love with me."

He smiles in spite of his discomfort. "Now you sound like my mother. She was a wrecking ball on my dating life."

"Aren't mothers supposed to be? She doesn't want some tramp turning your head with jiggling parts and voluptuous curves and ruining you for the nice, decent girls."

Ray can't help but wince. "What? Do they give you guys some kind of manual with this crap in it? Because if they do, it's grossly unfair. Boys don't get manuals for comprehending women, or if we did, I was absent that day."

"It's all right, Ray. I like that reason. It's very romantic, very chivalrous. People who discount solid Midwestern values make a grave mistake. They set themselves up for lifetimes of misery."

He's getting dizzy again, as though he's watching her spin a web around him. "I don't even know what I'm doing here, let alone what I want."

"You want me. That much should be obvious."

"I'm not in your league, Emma. Never have been. This isn't one of those clever sensibilities the Marines hacked out of me, either. It's not a class thing or an experience thing. It's something I never had to begin with. You're--I don't know--you're so far *beyond* me that I can't even put it into words. Half the time I want to strangle you because I think you're just playing with me, teasing me the way a kid squeezes a strange puppy. The other half I want to grab you and hold you at arms length and just look at you, marvel at you. You're incomprehensible to me."

She laughs gaily and springs across the couch. Beside him, onto him, with her legs folded across his and one arm thrown around his shoulders and her chin pressed in the ticklish space on his neck. She whispers into his ear, "You've only known me for two days. Of course I'm mysterious to you. I hope I'm a complete and overwhelming mystery for a lot longer than that, because if you figure out all my secrets too quickly, I'll be forced to think I'm as shallow as people believe I am."

Ray shakes his head, but not too vigorously. He doesn't want to dislodge her. "How old are you?"

Giggling. "How old are you?"

"Old enough that I should know better."

"Then I'm young enough not to, which makes us a perfect match until you come to your senses. By then, I should be old enough that you don't have to worry about it."

Because he can't look at her, can't see her expression, only feel her lips against his ear and her hip touching his, he says, "You're the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, Emma. And the fact that I feel that way scares me."

"You've been lonely for a very long time." Her voice is husky, wet with implication.

"Have I?"

"Would you have come tonight if you weren't?"

Lonely? He hasn't thought about it in those terms, and it troubles him immediately. Loneliness is a step away from desperation. Lonely men make stupid mistakes, fall into logical traps that convince them those stupidities were warranted.

What was the last thing he always made his men do before a major tactical engagement?

Run into the nearest town and get laid or sucked or jerked off. If a soldier didn't have the money to buy it himself, Ray gave it to him. Because there was something essential in the release, something necessary and clarifying in having someone else do it for you. Someone soft and receptive, someone who maybe just pretended to care, but if you bought it, if you contributed to the illusion, that gave it enough weight to make it real. And when they came back to camp late in the night or early the next morning, their eyes were brighter, their steps more firm, their hands less prone to trembling. Scared, yes. They were still scared, but they weren't desperately scared anymore. Getting laid wasn't going to save their lives on the battlefield, but it gave them a perspective that kept them from making the mistakes by which they might kill themselves.

"I'm not lonely," he says.

"You are. You just haven't realized it yet. You're lonely for me. Lonely and hungry."

If he was lonely--if his loneliness was obvious to someone like Emma, someone he'd just met--what did that mean? What mistakes was he making or essential facts was he missing? How was he not thinking clearly about the tasks at hand?

"Ray?"

Emma's voice in his ear, gone from pleasantly libidinous to questioning, bordering on concerned, because he's been screwing around in his own head when he was supposed to be answering her flirtation.

He draws himself back to the surface, to a place where he's in even remote contact with reality. "I've never said anything like that to a woman."

She purrs at him, delighted. "Never?"

"I haven't been in the types of places where there are women you'd want to say them to. And I imagine those types of women wouldn't have wanted to hear a G.I. actually say it and mean it, anyway."

Was that a stupid admission to make? He thinks it might have been.

"Then you must be falling in love with me."

"It's too early."

"I thought you said you hadn't been given a manual?"

"I did--no, that's not what I mean. Hell, I mean that it just doesn't work that way. Not where I come from. You don't fall in love with somebody after two freaking days! You fall into lust, or into deep desire, or into some really gripping kind of titillation."

"Or maybe," she says wickedly, "you've just never met anyone like me."

"I don't even *know* you!" And you don't know me, he adds silently. Which was really the whole issue now, wasn't it? Whatever the relationship between them was or might be, it was already wrong. It was a deception founded on his allowing her to believe that he was just a member of the crew, just a systems vet, a rat guy. It was the same vague, troubling, impossible relationship he had with Commander Sorensen.

Impossible because she was completely right. He was lonely for her, for Emma. Something within her cried out to him, troubled him, lured him in ways he didn't have the faculties or the experience to recognize. Everything he knew about her, had sensed, had touched, was lightning he tried to catch in a bell jar.

And he was ruining it. Every moment he spent with her like this was a step on the path to destruction because he couldn't tell her the truth. He wants her so badly he's risking everything.

Ray surges up from the couch, sheds her like a comforting blanket on a winter night. "I've got to go."

"What? Ray--but I thought--"

He waves her off, stomps to the door. "I know, I thought so to. But I can't, Emma. I just *can't*. Not now anyway. It wouldn't be right."

He keys the door, gets to listen to the kako-daimon start it's outraged blather. He turns back to Emma, still seated on the sofa. She grips the cushion fabric in between her fingers and she's poised on the edge as though she's gathering the strength or the resolve to spring after him. There are fat tears gathering in the corners of her eyes because she imagines that he's rejecting her. Or imagines that he's angry with himself for taking advantage of her distraught emotional state. He watches this idea dawn upon her, that he's excoriating himself because of Micah, because just a few hours after the boy was ravaged here he is, the jaunty stranger, trying to dig into the boy's surrogate mother's pants.

And because she wanted him to do this, to be here, to make love to her, he's made her culpable in a condemnation that doesn't even exist. In her mind, he's painted himself as honorable, stepping back from the precipice of temptation so that he does not hurt her while she is vulnerable. But because she wants him,

because she wasn't the first to resist, the honor is all his. All that remains for her is shame. He watches this dawn on her too, crumbling her quiet resolve, reducing her to tears.

It's all deception, has been from the start.

And the thing that kills him is that it's better this way. It has to be this way. He's required to make it be this way and encourage her to believe it, that it's partially her fault. Because the job demands of him that he not tell her the truth, that he not tell her that her brother is a legitimate suspect until further notice, that he's in the middle of all this tragedy trying to put the pieces together.

He just wants to scream.

"I'll see you again," he promises, hoping that she believes him.

It's all he can do.

Chapter Six

Given the change in his operating status, Ray knows it's time to contact his superiors and file one of the dreaded progress reports upon which bureaucracies thrive. Doing this always constitutes a big, throbbing pain in his ass. As a Marine, he once thought he'd learned everything he would ever need to know about making reports--traditional progress reports, sortie deconstructions, standard debriefing notes, after-action analyses. Reports were things you wrestled into submission using a nub of a pencil, a digital thesaurus and eventually a battered typewriter or ancient PC with a wobbling graphical display. You busted your ass to get them just right, even though you suspected that whatever bits of paper you generated were going to get filed somewhere by some enlisted clerk who wouldn't bother to read it or pass along to someone who might want to know the details that a report even existed. If you participated in a particularly brilliant mission or wrote an absolutely sparkling and evocative report, it might be looked at, hummed over, scanned into a secure database...and then languish, unread, as a collection of indiscriminate binary units.

But it was all about the text. Read or not, studied or ignored, providing insight into what went wrong (or right) or just circle jerking because the protocols said somebody had to write something up, text was what it was all about. Because text was immutable. Text defined history, even ignored history.

Oh, and appropriations committees loved text. They loved volumes of text, especially at budget time. Military need some cash and the silver-tongued orators with brass on their shoulders not able to hold a congressman's ear? How 'bout we just truck to the Forum Clave about ten million pages of last month's reports? Show them what they're getting for their money. Prove to them that we've done *something* of value in the last year. It's all right there in the text, provided you've got the clearance to read it.

The military loves text. Loves it so much that they print instructions on all of their weapons so any yahoo that picks up a gun they've never even seen before can be an expert on it in something like thirty seconds flat.

The Criminal Investigations Unit hates text for all the reasons that the military loves it. With text comes accountability. Text is fundamentally insecure because it is open to interpretation, because it ends up in the wrong hands, because it inspires questions in people who don't know enough about what's going on to reach the right conclusions. The CIU doesn't care about explaining itself to its detractors, only about achieving results. It's willing to let the body counts it generates speak for themselves.

Ray has always preferred the Marine method. He likes to have his orders on paper, on record, somewhere handy so he can point to them and say, should it become necessary, *I did not screw up here, gentlemen. I was merely the instrument of someone else's screw up.*

On the desk in his room, Ray has a standard issue EED personal terminal. Looks exactly like the terminals in every other enlisted guy's berth--blocky, ugly, supposed-to-be beige. They run pathetic forty gig processors, which is okay since most people use them for things like checking their mail, receiving the latest policy directives or orders from their immediate NCO, checking out the next day's menu in the crew mess, surfing for pornography.

Ray's terminal has a different set of guts. His processor speed is clocked in petaflops, half of which are dedicated to maintaining the encryption system. The other half are tied to the network cable, which itself loops into a disturbingly powerful signal accelerator of the sort usually installed in places like the primary comm bridge. The accelerator plugs into a private router that Sorensen was ordered to install so that any work Ray might perform on his PC would dash right past the network, through the ship's datacore, directly attach to a dedicated transmitter constantly reconfigured to beam along the EED's secure channel of Rapid Relay buoys. All of this nifty stealth messaging technology and *Paraclete's* attempts to encrypt and/or hide the fact that messages sent through it even existed devoured ominous chunks of the ship's computing resources. Just turning his terminal on had been known to send computer tech troubleshooters screaming off in a panic. So

Ray simply didn't do it. It made him feel too guilty.

The morning after what his mind has now irrevocably tagged The Emma Debacle, Ray seats himself in front of his terminal. For once, he's bothered to follow the proper procedures for a CIU agent. He's sealed the bulkhead door, armed his private stash of motion detectors, white noise generators, listening device snoopers, changed his encryption key and jacked the minimum message lock requirements from 1028 bits to 2056. He has showered and shaved and changed his clothes so he looks the part of a clean cut CIU operative. Lastly, he has retrieved his service worn Oberon Mark IV Marine pistol, stripped and cleaned it, loaded the magazine and advanced the first cartridge into the firing chamber. It's comforting weight hangs suspended over his left breast in a standard issue tactical harness, reminding him that should he be disturbed, he's authorized--nope, make that *required*--to track down the source of the disturbance and encourage them to unflinchingly adopt the CIU's Code of Silence as a personal standard of conduct. Capital C, capital S, spoken about using that ominous disaster documentary voice. Ray mentally associates the Code with a wet, gurgling noise, the type of sound a lung punctured by a .44 caliber bullet might make as it fills up with blood.

It takes three minutes of beam bouncing to make a connection with the CIU servers, time Ray uses to reconfigure the angle and depth of his terminal's pinpoint camera. Since this is partly about making an impression, he'd prefer to not show the officer that picks up the line his piles of dirty laundry and as yet unmade bed. He definitely doesn't want them to see Nomar under the nightstand munching on a pile of sensorily fascinating organic materials Ray has left there to keep him occupied.

In the absence of corroborating text, he's got Nomar, armed with a disturbing array of aural recording devices. Ray just can't get over the urge to cover his ass.

The way a progress report is supposed to work is that Ray's encrypted signal hits the CIU server array, gets itself broken by complex algorithms and randomly shunted to a high level, heavy lidded functionary in a suit who listens for awhile, asks poignant questions, confers with associates on another line, and provides the requisite orders or guidance necessary to continue the mission. Most of these guys look exactly like the two agents who recruited him, except even more nondescript. The one exception was the pretty redhead with the low cut blouse and smoldering green eyes who Ray progressed to for something like two hours, the last forty-five minutes of which involved him pretty much flagrantly making up progress reports just to keep her on the line, until she had to unilaterally cancel the stream before it posed a severe security risk. Why didn't they send agents like her out to perform recruitments? There's a question for the ages.

If possible, Ray never talks to the same suit twice on a given mission, thereby (he supposes) fracturing the flow of data among the suits so that only the suits at the top know exactly what's going on. For all he knows, the suits he talks with each time are taken out behind the building and administered a Code of Silence as soon as they break their connection.

As the remote servers rumble through their web of data transfer routines, Ray waits, subliminally crossing his fingers, hoping his perception of the whole communication schizophrenia is wrong and that he'll get the redhead again. Too rapidly, the featureless blue screen he's been looking at flickers and an image pops up. It's an office with governmental gray walls, bland, without pictures or plants or other identifying props. A desk plain and battered enough to be any desk in any office of any department of government in the universe. Behind the desk is a man, seated, smiling.

Ray makes a verbal outburst that is distinctly impolite in content. Then he says, "Why am I not surprised?"

Jack Holcomb looks older. He's gray about the temples, has crow's feet like trenches around his eyes. He's put on about forty pounds, most of it flab, which doesn't really look bad since he's in a Lt. Colonel's uniform. Flab is what you expect out of a colonel.

Holcomb licks his lips in a way that strikes Ray as greedy somehow, and grins. "I've been waiting for you to call, Gunny. Good to finally hear from you."

"I think I must've dialed the wrong number. I was supposed to be contacting the CIU, not the offices of the Army Asshole Department."

Holcomb's obvious pleasure doesn't waver. He looks, in fact, as if he's trying to restrain himself from giving the old conspiratorial wink. He succeeds in this endeavor, probably because he suspects Ray will turn the ship around and plot a course for Terra, Murder and General Mayhem if he does not.

Ray continues, "So I guess I've got you to thank for this."

"You were growing weary of the desert, Ray. And the desert was growing weary of you as well, or hadn't you noticed? I thought it might be best for everyone involved if you got away for awhile. Off to a safe distance, so to speak, until your particular case could be examined in more detail. The fact that you had all the necessary skills to excel in this field are something of a bonus, though not an unappreciated one, I assure you."

As Holcomb blathers, someone sneaks into Ray's room, opens a hole in his back and dumps about a thousand pounds of molten lead straight into his stomach. His stomach starts to roil and burn with the fierce heat of it. This is not the sinking feeling he's been told he's supposed to experience at times like this. It's a chained at the bottom of a mining shaft waiting for them to fill it up with cement sort of feeling.

Ray says, "You're about to tell me something I desperately don't want to hear. I can tell."

"Like what? You're afraid I'm going to say that the CIU doesn't exist? That the missions you've completed have been calculated ruses designed to keep you occupied while we kept you out of harm's way?" Holcomb laughs and shakes his head. A real gut buster. "Sorry, Ray. You *are* part of the CIU, though we've been careful to keep you better screened from the hustle and bustle of agency activity than we might most of our agents. You get special consideration because of your rank, you understand."

"My rank?"

"A field commission granted just before you left New Mes. Decent scores on the initial examinations just to make it look legitimate. Steady progress through the ranks over the last three years--accelerated, granted, but not without precedent. Not to mention, we couldn't very well be freelancing you out into the frontier unless the ship captains felt like they should extend you the proper courtesy and cooperation."

"I didn't take any examinations," Ray points out. "And nobody informed me that I'd been given a field commission."

Holcomb waves his hand vaguely. "Your records don't lie, Commander Marlowe."

He can find no reason to be surprised by this information.

"Oh, don't get self-righteous on me. Except for the test scores, it's all perfectly legitimate. You impressed a fair number of your CO's in New Mes, and we encouraged them to make it an official designation rather than just personal file commentary. They were happy to comply. Your CIU instructors asked that you not be informed during your training so you wouldn't try to pull rank on them, and having known you as I did, I agreed with them. Since then, well, it just hasn't come up."

"Does Sorensen know this?"

"He does. He wants you to think he doesn't because he's a clever old crank with friends in the right places. He's aware that you don't know, or didn't until now. You can't blame him for not wanting to share operational command of his own ship."

"Then why hasn't my pay grade changed, since you've got all the answers?"

Ray is just being an asshole and he knows it. Holcomb knows it too, so he ignores him. "You have, I assume, made contact to apprise us of the change in your status aboard *Paraclete*."

"Which you already know about. Chief Becker told me Sorensen had contacted the office and you'd specifically recommended me for the job." Ray scrambles about for a few seconds, ramming round pegs into square holes, refashioning information gleaned in the past two days to fit this new reality. "This isn't what you think it is, Jack. I don't know exactly what yet, but it isn't that."

Holcomb nods his head, suddenly serious. "Don't deceive yourself, Marlowe. You know exactly what this is. And it isn't coincidence, either. The question is, how is it possible that someone has connected you with events only you and I together witnessed?"

"Witnessed and survived," Ray says thinly. It's an important distinction in his mind. "But even if they are in a position to know, what are they trying to accomplish? I mean, other than trying to get my attention."

"That, I might be able to help you with."

"Well aren't you just full of surprises."

"On our way through the desert, after we failed to prevent Brezhnaya from awakening the *shed* at Ba'dai, I told you many things that I knew about the mythology of these creatures. You understand that until that time, all of my research had been academic in nature. Meaning, of course, that I knew what Brezhnaya knew, and I knew that he believed it. I did not believe it myself, though I took the necessary precautions."

"I remember," Ray says, scowling.

It may be that Holcomb remembers it the same way. A fleeting shadow, like pain or guilt, clouds his features. He continues, "I was a grand fool then, Ray. I admit that. But I was a fool because I came from a rational tradition. Our culture, our society, put away a belief in devils around the time of the Salem witch trials. We responded to our own penchant for hysteria by denying its source, by embracing science and tactual reality and the physical world as a singular, dominant principle. We threw out the baby with the bath water, as it were.

"After Ba'dai, I was insane for quite some time. I won't pretend that I was anything else. I have distinct memories of babbling to you about things I'm sure neither one of us understood at the time. But I wasn't insane in the traditional sense. I was achieving some sort of radical reorientation of consciousness. I was developing a perception of the dual nature of existence, with all that such a transformation entails. You know what that looks like, don't you? What it means? You've seen filthy old sinners converted to good Baptist standing, struck by Grace, transmogrified into Sunday-suit wearing zealots who see the finger of the Divine in every decision, every coincidence, every conversation. Conversion to a new paradigm is the introduction to a vast and terrible unexplored country. And turning your back on accepted reality--the reality that the mass of humanity has created and agreed upon--is the definition of madness.

"But you see, I needed to be mad in order to understand more about the *shed*, Ray. Only through the eye of madness could I go back through the ancient texts and sift through their mythology and their understanding of the duality of creation, and come to understand not what they said, but what they meant. I had to be able to

think like them to understand the assumptions behind the written text. Because they're not just behind it, they illuminate it."

Ray interrupts him. "You stopped making sense to me about the time you mentioned Baptists."

Holcomb frowns back and swipes his hand back and forth across his forehead. "All right. We talked once about the nature of the *shed*. I assume that you retained enough of that knowledge to serve as a background. In fact, I told you a lot about it, but in that entire two weeks that we were alone, and for several months afterward, what I didn't ask myself was what was Brezhnaya *doing*? What did he think he was accomplishing?"

"Unleashing an attack against the allied forces," Ray answers at once. "Breaking morale, punishing sympathizers. Creating a spirituo-terrorist weapon."

"That was what I thought, too. You heard about some of the incidents, then?"

"Enough."

"But here's the problem: the *shed* was not--is not--a weapon, or not a weapon sufficient to turn the tide of a war on that scale, not when used in that fashion. Maybe a thousand of them would have an impact, but not merely one. One is a devil outside your window, a blight on your neighbor's crop, a night terror to frighten children. So what was Brezhnaya's goal?"

Ray shrugs, completely lost. "A test run. He was making sure it could be done or that they could be programmed to follow his command. He wouldn't have wanted to create a hell he couldn't control."

"That's reasonable," Holcomb says, "but wrong. You're being manipulated by your childhood immersion in fairy tales. The post-Ba'dai events in New Mes were not the *shed* responding to programming. They were, if such a thing can be said, larks. The *shed* being itself for pleasure. You're neglecting the concept of the neutral meme."

"That applies how?"

"Manipulation of the *shed* in that way is mission oriented. The parameter set that drives the programming, the idea that informs the meme, is reset to zero after the task is carried out. Do you understand?"

He gets it. "It's too time and labor intensive unless you want to accomplish something you couldn't do with normal guns and willing followers. Like an assassination of a foreign official, or the infiltration of a nuclear complex. Something big."

"Except that even to do that, you have to provide a prohibitive amount of guidance. You have to know exactly what you're making the *shed* do, because the *shed* despises you. It does not want to serve your human purposes. In fact, it wants to destroy you for daring to have disturbed it. To command the *shed* is a nightmare of micromanagement wherein even the smallest mistake generates unforeseen disasters, because it wants to be free.

"That is the hidden concept in all the ancient texts, this idea of disturbance. To call the *shed*, you disturb it from something else that it was doing. You remove it from an environment that is somehow essential to its nature and pleasure, and drag it into corporeal activity."

Whatever Ray thought he had understood flutters away. He wonders if it would help or hurt matters if he beat his head against the wall for a few minutes.

But Holcomb, grimly determined, goes on. "Brezhnaya was not summoning the *shed* to escalate the war in New Mes. He was trying to stop it, Ray. He was trying to end the war by bottling up its root cause. Brezhnaya was trying to put the genie back into the bottle."

His tone says that this should be a bombshell, that it should radically reorient the perspective from which Ray views the world. Ray swallows hard, trying to make sense of it, but all he can feel is numb. Or stupid. There doesn't seem to be much difference.

Because it seems like a reasonable question, Ray asks, "How can summoning the *shed* stop a war, Jack? I mean, the last time I was on the ground, it looked an awful lot like some major world players were firmly entrenched in kicking one another's asses."

"Let me put it in Gnostic terminology," Holcomb begins.

"I hate it when you do that."

"I know, but the Gnostics were really much more rational about the spiritual world than their counterparts. Where the Hebrews, Arabs and Greeks--and frankly, the assorted Angles and Saxons and our Germanic forbearers as well--had an organic mythology that sprang from a deep seated fear of the natural and supernatural worlds which often became intermixed and inseparable, the Gnostics set about to construct a mythology. Mythology was a symbolic language for their philosophy. It was a very modern viewpoint, I think, even if the concepts they sought to explain were ancient and supernatural in essence.

"In their creation myth, Ialdabaoth makes for himself helpers, followers, created beings. The chief among these were the Archons, who were demigods. Massively more powerful than men, just a step below Ialdabaoth himself, in fact. At levels of near divinity, one degree of separation from a divine emanation is not much, you understand. Ialdabaoth gave to the Archons immense powers over time and space. He gave them areas of expertise, oversight in the mechanisms of creation and the basic forces which compel the universe to cling together and function in some coherent fashion. Thus, the Archons ruled, and to each was given a geographical kingdom. There was an Archon for Persia, for Asia, for Egypt--for the entire known world. The underlying argument being that when nations came into conflict, it wasn't so much the political ambitions of the human leadership that was at fault, but the Archons manipulating the weak vessel that is man in their own semi-divine power struggles. The microcosm was a mirror for the macrocosm.

"The *shed* are Archons of a sort. Ialdabaoth's attempt to supplant humans as the pinnacle of creation, certainly, but Archons as well. You might think of them as junior members of the demigod club--with all the same foibles and plots and ambitions as their senior members, just with a more degraded form of divinity. This *shed* that I've called Devourer, the one Brezhnaya called out, is an Archon of strife, Ray. He and others like him--all the *shed* are Archons of strife--rule over what we call the Middle East, from Palestine to Turkey, the Saudi peninsula to Kashmir.

"Look, I've told you that the *shed* comprises a neutral meme, which is true insofar as the human connection goes. But they are also fundamental principles of creation. If they respond to parameter sets like a computer program, they must also be viewed as complete computers in themselves. They come with a unique hardware configuration that predisposes them to operate in a given fashion. The Devourer has been hardwired to generate hostility, to cause war, to celebrate martial conquest and the shedding of blood. It's what he *does*. Not from a position of evil, you understand, but just as the expression of a universal imperative. Strife is part of reality; Devourer is one of the forms of that imperative. He is *shed*, an adversary of hostility."

Ray blinks uncertainly. "And Brezhnaya believed he could do what? Create peace on earth by distracting the *shed*?"

"Not 'peace on earth' as you so glibly put it. Peace in his homeland, yes. A distraction of the *shed* that would lead to the cessation of hostilities for a time. It can't make wars happen with a finger snap. War is brewed, and that takes time and effort. I think Brezhnaya was a reasonable man. I think he believed that he could stop the fighting for a year, maybe two, maybe for as much as a decade if he had the stomach for it, for what he would have to do to keep the *shed* distracted. And in the meantime, he could orchestrate political shifts, assassinations, terrorist actions that might bring leadership to the region that was not such a willing tool in the *shed's* hands."

"Oh hell!" Ray barks back. "You make him sound like a terrorist for peace, Jack. The Mikhail Brezhnaya I read about in the papers was not a nice guy. He was a very bad guy, in fact, who needed to have a bullet put in his head."

"I wouldn't be so quick to judge him, my friend. Not until you've lived his life."

"Oh, cry me a freaking river. He was a dangerous, antisocial misanthropist, and you know it."

"He was also a man who buried his entire family in the name of war. Three daughters, two sons, all under the age of twelve. His wife was purged by his own government for reasons which are not immediately clear, but which we suspect had something to do with a tactical failure that Brezhnaya contributed to. They wanted to send him a message to pay more attention to his work. He was a loyal soldier who found the old axiom that war is a sword that cuts both ways to be horribly true." Holcomb shrugs, as if these are things he doesn't expect Ray to understand. "I won't argue that he wasn't a monster, but he had his reasons. Any one of us who wears the uniform could just as easily follow the same path if we were forced to endure so much despair. Brezhnaya was weary of conflict, of suffering, and he believed he had found a way to put an end to a generation of carnage, so that no one else would have to suffer the same losses he had known. Despite his methods and ultimately his failure, the impulse should not be comprehended as anything but patriotic."

"Listen to me, Ray. What we witnessed at Ba'dai was a poorly informed tableau of Brezhnaya's vision. We saw through the glass darkly and reached the wrong conclusions. I've spoken to members of his sect, questioned them, shall we say, *vigorously* in some cases. The rite we interrupted...what we construed as murder--those men were volunteers, Ray. They were martyrs sacrificing their lives to end the conflict. They chose to die at the hands of their brothers, fathers, sons in the name of peace."

It was enough. It was all he could stand to hear. Ray puts his hand up, shakes his head. Stop. For God's sake, just *stop*. He didn't want to think about crazy martyrs.

"But what does this have to do with me? What does this have to do with a kid murdered on my ship in the middle of nowhere?"

Holcomb sighs, a dry and forlorn sound that translates with frightening clarity across the frozen depths of space. He peers at Ray through the monitor with eyes that appear sunken, bruised. "About a year ago, allied troops finally gained the upper hand in the zone around Baghdad and began occupation. In the first chaotic days after our troops surged into the city, the Iraqi National Museum was bombed. Numerous irreplaceable treasures and archaeological artifacts were destroyed. The initial assessment was that it was some sort of abortive attempt by fleeing Iraqi soldiers to preserve sacred objects from the infidel invaders. Assorted Forum experts and Iraqi antiquities agents swooped in to catalog the losses and to salvage anything that might be saved. It was brought to my attention through various channels that the actual damage to any of the artifacts was quite small and mostly superficial in nature. The explosions that had wracked the museum seemed more engineered to rend the structure rather than its contents. It took them three weeks to determine that the only piece unaccounted for in the destruction was a massive stone ring unearthed in Saudi about two decades ago, during the Republican Guard blitz. Other than the curiosity factor, it was an artifact of dubious historical value--quite possibly because there hadn't been an opportunity to study it closely. The national museum in

Baghdad operates much as its American counterparts in that there are scads more items to be studied and documented than there are people interested in doing the analysis, especially in times of war, where archaeology students can be taught to fire a flintlock just as effectively as a shepherd boy."

A massive stone ring, Ray thinks. Then, *he doesn't know about modern medicine, does he...You think Solomon was an asshole?...I have a stone ring, inscribed with Solomon's sacred seals and incantations, fused with the bones of my skull, by God.*

Holcomb seems to watch him, nodding. "There was peace in Jerusalem and in all of Israel in Solomon's time," he whispers. "Solomon the Wise."

"What happened to it?" Ray's voice is thick, clotted. He feels like he's choking.

"I launched an immediate recovery expedition. People were questioned, bribes were paid...other, less savory actions were taken. But it could have been going anywhere in the world, from any port within driving distance; hurtled to unknown destinations from any of a hundred regional airports. There was simply no way to cover the ground quickly enough. By the time we picked up the trail--from Kuwait to Bangkok to Buenos Aires--the interstellar cargo hauler *Fortitude* was burning across the void for New Holyoke."

Ray swallows, and his throat clicks. A chitinous sound, as though he's gorging on beetles. "New Holyoke."

"*Fortitude* was one of the newer class vessels, illegally retrofitted with a prototype Ver Linck Drive. The crossing took four months. Our reports indicate that the cargo shipment was unloaded as scheduled, though nothing of any interest to us appears on the manifest. Her captain is approached by Port Authority investigators, but having transacted his business, he elects not to remain for the investigation. *Fortitude* burst from her mooring locks like a cannonball with our own EED craft giving pursuit. With her Ver Linck Drive engaged, she outdistances them in a matter of hours. Within twelve, she's home free. Except, unaccountably, since PA claims and has subsequently proven that our side never fired a shot, *Fortitude* explodes. Accident reconstruction experts determined that the Drive had been sabotaged by a rather simple explosive device cleverly hidden. Though it didn't make the evening news, it was the first ship to be destroyed by Lilaiken extremists."

"You've got to be kidding me."

"Not at all. They took complete credit within hours of the disaster, before it was generally known that a disaster had even occurred."

"But you're telling me that Lilaiken separatists--"

Holcomb nods. "They orchestrated the raid on the Iraqi National Museum in order to obtain a Solomonic ring. They contracted to have the ring shipped to New Holyoke. The question of the hour is whether or not it was just a stone ring. Or was it a stone ring that *contained* something. A vessel, perhaps."

"I'm not following."

"The circle, the ring is an ancient symbol of power. The Qabbalistic *sephiroth*, the Hindu *chakra*, the Western fairy ring, what are these? They are vessels of power, containers for the essential energy of the universe. Solomon, it is said and written, captured djinn and demons in stone rings of his own devising. Arabic myth says that elemental beings are subject only to the power of the circle, transfixed by their perfection, lost in curve of space and the tracery of line bending eternally into itself, racing about circumference like St. Elmo's Fire. So was it just a ring the Lilaikens shipped to New Holyoke, or was it something else entirely, to which the ring was incidental. A shipping container, as it were."

Ray can hardly choke out the words. "A *shed*."

But why?

"To foment war," Holcomb says quietly, as if he can read Ray's mind. "To escalate the frontier independence movement by inciting whole colonies to violence against the FSA, against Terran hegemony. To let the genie out of the bottle for a time, enough to serve their purposes, then stuff him back again when his task is completed."

Ray shakes his head. It's too much to process, raises too many questions. He needs to keep hold of the root that steadies him. "I've been unable to identify any Lilaiken presence here, so this still doesn't explain what's happening to me on *Paraclete*."

"Oh, I'm certain that it does," Holcomb answers, smiling. "You just don't know how yet."

"But you expect me to find out."

"Either there or on New Holyoke. Commander Sorensen has been informed that you'll be disembarking as soon as *Paraclete* arrives in port, and I'm in the process of transmitting to you the probable specifications of a cargo container needed to ship a ring of the size and weight in question. This is proprietary information, Ray. The local EED organ was only told that the ship contained stolen Terran artifacts, but that's as specific as we chose to get given the sensitivity of this operation."

"And since you figured you could always drop me out here anyway..."

"I most certainly did not want them getting their hands on a Solomonic ring without having a reliable agent in place to guide them in its proper handling. So, EED has pretty much allowed the investigation on their end to stall, and even if I was in a position where I could push them without creating inter-agency strife, I wouldn't want to. This is not one of those situations where I would feel comfortable providing a full and detailed briefing to some desk ape half the universe away."

Ray nods. "Understood."

"All the same, when you arrive, you should check in with the locals and enlist them where necessary to maintain the illusion of inter-agency cooperation. But you are going to be largely on your own, though we'll send appropriate instructions and notifications of your imminent arrival to our EED and FSA counterparts. Letters of reference, as it were. I trust you'll be able set your own mission goals planetside."

"I can't believe you're exiling me to a frontier colony."

"All part of the job, Ray."

"I hate you, Jack."

"I don't ask you to love me. Just to make me proud." Holcomb reaches forward to toggle the switch that will sever their connection. "Do try not to be overly troublesome, Ray. As hard as that might be for you."

Jack Holcomb grins widely, then the screen goes blank and Ray is left alone in his room.

In the afternoon, Ray makes his way uplevel to Marine Barracks Level Four, what Kilgore and Rodriguez had

termed the Hump Deck. He hasn't come this way before, has in fact avoided the area on principle, because he was afraid it would make him feel homesick. Upon arrival at the security checkpoint, he finds that either Becker or Sorensen has already paved the way. The desk sergeant guarding the bulkhead door briefly checks his id against the list and tells him that he's expected. Ray asks for directions to Captain Cable's office and is given a refreshingly terse set of instructions.

He wanders inside, and yep, there's that stab of longing, of old familiarity. The gangways are straight and clean, a glowing olive drab from what he fully expects to have been thousands of hand polishings, deck swabbings, demerit based repainting missions doled out by an officer corps who believed that idle hands were indeed the devil's playground. If it was physically possible, they would probably have found a way to make the grunts dig completely redundant latrines. He strolls past sharp intersections and through pressure doors that remind him of choke points, places where a squad of well supplied soldiers could hold off a battalion strength invading force with a minimum of force. At every open door, he sees a desk; behind every desk a specialist or sergeant or company clerk; on each face a steady look of calculation because they've been tracking the flop of his feet against the deck and have been evaluating his potential threat all the way up the corridor. Deeper in, there are recreation rooms with wide vid terminals, weight and exercise facilities, a general use computing room with rows of currently unoccupied terminals. Everywhere is the corrosive scent of cleaning agents, floor wax, shoe polish.

It smells like home.

He locates the right intersections, takes the correct number of turns, and exactly as promised, he finds a broad gangway which terminates in a sealed bulkhead hatch marked General Barracks Four, 15th Marine Frontier Expeditionary Force, C Company. Below the official designation is a neatly printed, hand made paper sign taped to the door which reads: The Fighting Astro Nots.

To the left is an open doorway and beside the door there's a nameplate affixed to the wall identifying it as the entrance to the office of Captain Bran Cable. Ray likes him already, a deck officer who chooses the berth closest to his men rather than closest to the exit or to rooms staffed by other officers. Or it could just mean that the Marines of C Company were pains in the ass who bore constant watching.

Ray ducks inside, into a small reception area with a desk, more glistening olive drab on the walls and an assortment of framed military photographs, most of which are candid shots of soldiers in various goofing around poses, making faces for the camera. There's a second door behind the desk, and a man leaning against the frame in natty dress greens with his arms crossed over his chest.

He nods a greeting at Ray and says, "If you're looking for Specialist Harrell, you can catch him in the chow hall. I sent him to lunch about five minutes ago."

"Actually, I'm looking for Captain Cable."

"That would be me."

"The bars on your collar gave you away. I'm Ray Marlowe. Chief Becker has probably spoken to you by now."

Cable straightens his shoulders and drops his arms to his side, a pose of relaxed attention. "Becker said I would feel the powerful urge to salute you, but that I should probably resist the urge." He tacks a tentative "sir" onto the end after the slightest hesitation, clearly uncertain about the proper etiquette.

"Stop it," Ray answers, rolling his eyes. "Becker has delusions of rank inflation. Just call me Ray."

Cable relaxes at once, much to Ray's relief. The captain is a massive black man, clean shaven from chin to scalp and roughly the same size and dimensions as the typical Division I All-American linebacker. If he'd wanted to salute, Ray probably wasn't going to be able to stop him.

"And you've come for Rodriguez and Kilgore?"

"Actually, at the moment I've come to seek your permission to borrow them. I'm not interested in putting a scuff on your boots. If you can't spare them, I'll recruit assistants from somewhere else, but I'd honestly prefer to work with Marines."

"But are you sure you want those two Marines? Those soldiers' names and 'work' tend to not appear in the same sentence with any regularity." Cable shows him a slight grin and wink to demonstrate that he's being playful. "Is this a short term assignment, or should I have them officially transferred to your unit?"

"The plan is to have it wrapped up by the time we dock. My hope is to be sipping pina coladas on the Mezzanine by the end of the week and reflecting upon what a smashing success this assignment was."

"But you'll be taking them *with you* for the duration, correct? Or am I not correctly understanding the situation?"

It takes him a minute, but Ray gets it. Cable doesn't want Kilgore and Rodriguez left to float around the deck most of the day waiting for Ray to come up with something for them to do. It would look too much like they were slacking off to the other soldiers in the barracks, like they were getting special treatment. It was bad for morale.

"Yes," Ray says quickly. "Certainly. I'll find somewhere to stack them, then get them back to you as soon as possible."

Cable gives him an amiable nod. "I appreciate your courtesy, Ray."

"And I appreciate the fact that you haven't pointed out to me yet that I'm a dumbass, Captain. I really am sorry if this is an inconvenience for you."

Grinning wide, showing teeth. "Believe me, you have no idea how grateful I am for the inconvenience. But you will. By tomorrow this time, you'll be begging me to take them back."

"By the time it's all over, I fully expect that they'll be the ones doing the begging."

Ray doesn't elaborate and Cable has the good graces not to ask what he means. The burly captain strides past him and out into the gangway, beckoning Ray to follow. "Your boys are in the barracks, *should* be stowing their gear for the move. God knows they've had all morning to get it done. Their mates were assigned to pull head polish duty--cleaning the latrine--this morning, so I suspect Kilgore and Rodriguez are getting a might nervous about now. They definitely do not want to be caught lounging when the rest of the barracks troops in."

Probably a true enough assessment.

Ray follows Cable out the door and through the bulkhead hatch at the end of the corridor. The barracks is a long, low ceilinged chamber blocked into neat rows by sleeping cubicles stacked three berths tall. The cubicles remind Ray of the sleeping compartments on passenger trains, claustrophobic boxy affairs with a dark curtain that can be pulled across the entrance to provide the illusion of privacy. This is not exactly living in comfort, but it's better than a tent and a cot and gusting desert winds. Most of the cubicles are crowded with

pictures, letters scrawled in blocky, children's handwriting, fading centerfolds. Images of home and family with which the soldiers surround themselves for those quiet minutes before they fall asleep.

Cable guides him through the gauntlet, wending toward the back corner. They encounter Kilgore and Rodriguez tossing a football in low, tight spirals down the length of the aisle. Kilgore has his back to them, so Rodriguez sees them first. He executes a sharp stand to attention, just in time to receive the point of the football from Kilgore's last throw in the middle of his gut. He doesn't flinch, which Ray finds amusing more than anything else.

Kilgore barks, "Good hands, assclown."

"Officer on the deck," Rodriguez answers, with only the slightest hint of strain in his voice.

Cable turns partly toward Ray and rolls his eyes. "They're on their best behavior at the moment. It's all downhill from here."

By this time, Kilgore has dragged himself to attention. He snaps off a regulation salute for the captain, and shouts, "Begging the Deck Officer's pardon, sir, but you are unfairly characterizing the efficiency and conduct of this pair of Marines. Respectfully request that you do not screw up this assignment on our behalf, as we two squared away Marines are more than capable of managing same."

Cable shakes his head. He is not, apparently, an officer who chooses to stand on ceremony. "Just collect your gear, gentlemen. You're being temporarily reassigned to Commander Marlowe per your briefing last evening. Try to be less of a pain in his ass than you are in mine."

Kilgore's eyes go wide. To Ray, he says, "You said you weren't an officer."

"I got promoted."

"Good for you, sir." He finds a way to sound both patronizing and disgusted.

More eye rolling from Cable. "Commander, any time you decide you might need directions to the Marine brig, you let me know. Day or night. I'll probably even send an escort detail to give you a hand."

"You're killing me, Cap," Kilgore moans. He lurches into a bottom level bunk and drags out an outrageously stuffed duffel. "This is the closest I've ever been to a Commander and I'm trying to make a good impression here."

Rodriguez jogs up, carrying his own gear. He runs his gaze across Ray's khaki and buttoned down civilian attire. "Am I to understand that we'll be quartered in the downlevel portion of the ship?"

"Does it matter?" Cable asks.

"I just want to know if I've packed appropriately."

Kilgore winks. "He's talking about prophylactics, sir."

"I'm not talking about prophylactics. I assumed from the previous conversation that this assignment tended to be more oblique in nature than a standard military operation. I left my battle dress uniforms in the locker, except for the one I'm wearing."

"Smart thinking, dumbass," Kilgore murmurs.

But Ray nods in affirmation. "Not downlevel the way you're thinking about it. I've secured rooms on the Garden. We'll be operating out of there. Most of the time, it'll be to our advantage if you don't look like a Marine on active duty."

"Sure, he's the brains of this outfit. I'm just the sidekick." Kilgore flashes his buddy a reproachful glare. "That's still Sergeant Sidekick to you, Corporal."

Ray notes that Kilgore doesn't seem particularly interested in repacking his own bag. Cable turns around, pointing back the way they came. Typically Marine, he puts on his confidential tone despite the fact that his men are standing within ready earshot. "In all seriousness, you could do worse than these two. Rodriguez is sharp, knows how to fill in the blanks and color outside the lines. Sergeant Kilgore makes up for what he lacks in social acumen with persistence. I can provide you with their personnel files if you want to examine their backgrounds more closely, but they're solid enough. They've both seen combat in the Mes."

But Ray declines the offer. Cable is naturally curious about this operation, but his service manners are too well developed to come right out and ask. He's more than likely aware that this is a loop he's been left out of with intention, and Ray doesn't feel the need to explain. "One Marine is as good as another. These two just happened to be handy."

"Nothing quite like feeling wanted, is there?" Kilgore remarks casually. "Makes me all warm and fuzzy inside."

Ray just says, "Let's go."

The berth Becker has arranged for them has no running water. Sometime after their departure from Stratskaya Daransk, it had developed unexpected plumbing issues which rapidly escalated into burst pipes and severe water damage, requiring the removal of its original inhabitants to other accommodations. The sheetrock facades on some of the walls have warped and buckled from the moisture. The carpet reeks of mildew and still feels vaguely squishy underfoot, though Becker has assured Ray that it isn't sodden and the electrical wiring is sound. But it's spacious by shipboard standards, which was his primary concern. A broad sitting room with plenty of wall space and its own functional kitchenette, a short hallway leading to a bedroom on one side and a private bath on the other. The bathroom is a total loss. It's sheetrock walls are unstable, have actually collapsed in some places, covering the floor with chunks of debris. The mirror over the sink is fractured and hangs at a precarious angle. There's a jagged hole in the bulkhead by the shower where someone torched an access panel into the superstructure to get at the burst pipes. It's an inconvenience Ray can live with.

More importantly, the suite is situated midway between Madame Trousseau's and the food court, which places them directly in the thick of the passenger areas--a high profile location where they will see and be seen by *Paraclete's* non-crew component. Give them an excuse to rub shoulders with the natives.

After his encrypted call to Holcomb, Ray spent the rest of the morning supervising the installation of two additional beds, the removal of most of the furniture that remained and its subsequent replacement with long, folding tables and a series of mounted marker boards. He provided his own technical assistance in transferring the ultra-powerful terminal from his old room and establishing a similar connection to the broadcast array. It isn't as secure as the old one, but it's sufficient. He doesn't expect to be passing messages to CIU until after he arrives at New Holyoke anyway. He's added a couple of standard machines to the mix, assuming Rodriguez and Kilgore will be savvy enough to know how to use them. He's also borrowed the spare drone diagnostic computer from the shop and modified the kitchenette's electrical system to handle its increased power demand. Nomar is likely to feel crowded perched on the narrow slab of countertop between the small refrigerator and the useless sink, but he's not in a position to complain.

Ray hasn't figured out how he's going to explain his procurement of this equipment to Ziggy. It's on the list of things to do, right after coming up with a plausible set of reasons that he won't be showing up for work anymore. Becker could handle it for him, Ray is certain, but Ziggy deserves something better than being treated as a loose end. Besides, it was plain old bad policy to piss off a man whose wife liked to cook for you.

By the time it's ready for occupation, the stateroom looks much more like a military planning office than a passenger compartment. Ray suspects there will be more additions in the near future, things he hasn't realized that they need yet in order to run the investigation, but it will do for now.

Kilgore walks in the door, sniffs at the air and makes a face. "Sure, we're moving to the Garden Level, he says. You didn't mention that it would be armpit of the Garden Level." An amused glance at Rodriguez over his shoulder. "Maybe we can talk him into letting us telecommute. What do you say, sir?"

Ray is standing in the kitchenette, examining the diagnostic terminal as it runs through it's starting sequence. Nomar is on the counter, powered down for the moment while he sucks juice from the charging system. Ray doesn't turn from what he's doing. "I say that if you call me 'sir' one more time, or if you salute me, or if you in any way treat me like an officer, I'm going to put my fist through your face and pull your brain stem out through your nose. Are we clear?"

Kilgore's response: "And the place has got rats, too!"

Apparently it was clear enough.

Ray continues, "Toss your gear in the bedroom. It's down the hall on the left. The bathroom is on the right, but in case you haven't figured it out, we don't have running water, so don't use it. There's a public latrine just around the curve of the concourse past Madame Trousseau's. Locating shower facilities is completely dependent on your own personal initiative. You'll each be issued a ship's credit chip for meals and other purchases, so if you don't think you've got the right clothes for this job, you'll be able to take care of that. I expect you to take your meals in the food court, either singly or in tandem. Try to spread the wealth, be seen in as many places as possible so people get used to looking at you. You're free to use your real names in conversation, but try not tell people that you're Marines. More than likely they'll figure it out for themselves, but let them be free to assume that you're on leave or in transit to a new duty station. For the record, the rat's name is Nomar. He's our eyes and ears, and at this point, I consider him the most valuable component of this team, so try not to piss him off. Because he bites."

"You haven't actually told us what we're doing here," Rodriguez points out. Not curious at all, just recognizing business. "We haven't been informed of the parameters of this mission."

Ray turns to face them. "Fair enough. The parameters are actually sufficiently vague as to be practically non-existent. Ostensibly, we've been handed the lead in investigating the murder of a boy named Micah Uytdehaage, the body discovered on Omicron last night. I expect that it will become more complicated than that. Security Chief Becker will tell you and anyone else who asks that this issue is too hot for him to handle this close to docking, which is a complete load of cow feces. It's been handed to me because I happen to possess some expertise that bears on this case that uniquely qualifies me to pursue it with more efficiency. The exact nature of that expertise will be made clear to you if and when the need arises. I've drafted the two of you because as a Marine, I prefer to work with Marines rather than sec-os. Until the time that the situation becomes more clear, your primary responsibility in this stage of the investigation is to mingle with the passengers, chat them up, make friends. I want you to gather human intelligence."

Rodriguez accepts this with a nod. "What sort of intelligence are we looking for?"

"Anything that seems odd. That's about as clearly as I can state it."

"And the risk assessment?"

"It's not the Mes, but I'm not ruling out physical hazard at this point. Honestly, I just don't know what we're up against. I hope to have a clearer picture shortly."

This is annoyingly vague for Ray's taste, but it's all he is prepared to offer. Rodriguez only frowns slightly, accepting without comment.

"So you're telling us that we're supposed to spend the next couple of weeks hitting on chicks, spending EED's cash, buying rounds in the local drinking establishments and generally being publicly vivacious?" Kilgore rubs his hand thoughtfully along his chin, mulls the possibilities. "I think I can probably live with that, even if the room does suck. You want we should start now?"

"Get settled in first. This evening, we're going down to Omicron again for a little confab with Bobby Diggs. I'll need the two of you there to help put him at ease. You can start being vivacious first thing in the morning."

Kilgore and Rodriguez exchange a significant look, like they're trying to decide if it's appropriate to give a high five. Instead, they nod and troop back toward the bedroom. But at the corner, Rodriguez stops and peers at Ray.

"One thing I've got to ask. The rat--you didn't name him after the ballplayer by any chance, did you?"

Ray beams. "I think we're going to get along just fine, Mr. Rodriguez. Just fine, indeed."

Chapter Seven

So here's this deckhumper, Bobby Diggs. He's a wiry, thin-as-a-stick black man with an immense afro and eyes so wide and white they must glow in the dark. Ray keeps looking at him and thinking that there's no way he can have been a Marine at any time in his life. He doesn't have the mass for it. His fully loaded, official military issue rucksack would have doubled his body weight. Just attempting to lift his subby--just thinking about attempting to lift his subby--would probably have pulled his arms right out of his sockets. Unbelievable.

Except the way he sits there, his long and lanky limbs slung all over the place, gesticulating with a cigarette whose ashes inevitably end up flung through the air and across the floor, creates a dissonance that is curious. His pupils are like playing a game of Follow the Bouncing Ball the way they roll from Ray to Kilgore to Rodriguez. Everything about him snaps like a sail in a stiff breeze. He conveys the impression that he's coiled, tense, dangerous in ways Ray can't put his finger on. Even his slow, languid speech patterns carry the swagger of a long tradition of Marines.

He's smoking, glaring, shaking his head and saying, "Can you believe this mess, I ask you? I mean, can you comprehend what is going on down here? It's insane."

Nomar most certainly cannot believe it, but he's less fascinated by the content of the man's speech than the carcinogenic cocktail of his cigarette smoke, which he's been chasing around the room since they arrived. It doesn't matter. Nomar is running in full recording mode, taking Diggs' story with all the precision of a deposition.

Diggs has gone on in this vein for the last ten minutes. The four of them are hanging out in a small, plainly decorated room, seated on stools like the ones that dot bars and taverns all over human space. Just outside the door to this room--what is really just a storage closet that seems to have run out of things to actually store--is the security checkpoint, a wide desk crammed into an alcove just outside the doors to the main Omicron lift. They're back here in relative privacy because the desk is manned by two other sec-os, one with a sidearm seated behind the desk, another with a full-on rifle, safety off, standing where he has an unobstructed field of fire up and down the gangway. Diggs has already told them that temporary checkpoints have been established at the port and starboard midpoints, one right outside the Marine munitions dump where just yesterday Rodriguez and Kilgore had spent a few hours counting shells.

Diggs finds this arrangement extremely offensive.

He goes on, "For six months, man, it's just been Bobby Diggs on the deck. That's it, just me humping the deck twelve hours a day. Me changing lightbulbs and jiggering with the electrical system. Me checking the visitors in, scanning their papers, checking them out. Me supervising the magnetic grid and making sure they were taking only the items they was authorized to take. Then we have us a bit of trouble, and I follow the protocol just like Chief Becker spelled it out, and what do I get out of it?" He gestures vaguely toward the closed door. "These invading motherfuckers who would rather be strolling the Garden trying to tag some rich bitch 'tang. Come down here with their game faces on and their firearms strapped on their hips like they're going to do something Bobby Diggs didn't do. Ain't nobody heard that bit about the barn door and the runned-off horses? It's too late."

He shakes his head, realizes that he's run his cigarette down to the filter. He digs in his breast pocket and drags out a battered pack of Camels, lights up again, sucking deep like this action is the only thing that keeps him thinking clearly. Nomar picks the used butt right off his fingers and stuffs it greedily into his mouth.

Diggs pokes his finger at Ray. "I saw you last night, 'cept you wasn't alone. You had this here rat with you. He followed you like a little dog."

"And how was that?" Ray asks. He'd made a point of avoiding the main lift.

"I told you, man. I hump the deck. Just because there's a little excitement amidships don't mean that I start hugging the desk. I found that boy, Mr. Marlowe. You seen him. That wasn't no accident, and I didn't need Chief Becker coming down here with lights and cops and all that screaming to tell me so. I figured there was a chance the sicko that did this was still out there, hiding somewhere, waiting for things to chill before he made his way up. Didn't find nothing, though. No blood or anything to follow. I guess he must have done it somewhere else and just hauled the boy down here."

"That was my conclusion, too," Ray says. "Now here's what I'm thinking happened: whoever dumped the body--probably the same person who actually committed the murder--did enough scouting in advance to know that you're the type of deck security who stays mobile. He knew he didn't have to find a way to drag that body down one of the stairways, that he stood a reasonable chance of not being detected if he just took the lift."

Diggs shakes his head, a not-so-subtle indication that he thinks Ray must be some kind of stupid.

"Our boy didn't use no lift," he says.

"How can you know that?"

"Number one, the non-passenger deck lifts don't have an express override. He would have been running a chance that anybody who wanted to get on the lift at any point between where he got on and Omicron could just push a button, wait for the doors to open and find him out."

Rodriguez says, "Unless he was hard enough that he wouldn't have any qualms killing someone he encountered in an accidental meeting. From what you've said, Ray, about the disposition of the corpse, I'd assume this is a guy without qualms."

Kilgore jerks his thumb at Rodriguez and winks. "Officer material here is forgetting that then the suspect would have two or more bodies to dispose of then, and he'd have a mess to deal with in the elevator. That creates a whole bunch of annoying details to deal with. I'd assume if I was trying to stash a body somewhere that I'd go out of my way to avoid creating extra details."

"Besides that," Diggs went on. "I got me a lift sensor that pings my radio whenever the elevator stops on this level. The cargo boys know that they're supposed to wait for me to come back to them if they need to make a pick up, and they can't get into any of the bays without my card to admit them, so the system works just fine. I would have known if the suspect had come down on the lift, unless it didn't happen on my shift. If it happened before I punched in, then the last shift would have found the body--assuming, of course that they even stepped away from the desk in the first place, which is unlikely."

"So he came down one of the ladders," Ray agrees. "Gruesome work."

"But how did he get into the bay in the first place?" Rodriguez asks quietly. "Unless he had a card for the lock. Or unless he knew how to jimmy the lock in a way it wouldn't be detected."

"Wouldn't take no rocket scientist," Diggs answered. "This ain't no secure zone, except port and starboard, where the dumps are."

This is wending in a direction Ray doesn't want to go. "If our guy has a card, he's either swiped it--"

"Or he's a member of the crew," Kilgore finishes, not liking the conclusion any more than Ray does from the look on his face. "I'll talk to some of my ladies in equipment and accounting in the morning and see if they've

had any reports of missing access cards."

"And if he didn't have a card," Ray says, glancing at Rodriguez to get his attention, "there should be something anomalous in the lock's access log. We'll need to look into that a little more closely. Talk to Becker or one of his lieutenants tomorrow and see if you can get him to switch out the locks and hand the original over to us for analysis."

Ray swings back to Bobby Diggs, who has started yet another cigarette. "You've already been rather instructive, Bobby, and I'm deeply grateful for your help so far. But I need you to start from the beginning again, from the point at which you came on shift last night and tell it one more time. I know you've already filed an official report. I've seen that, but sometimes we leave things out in the official reports, you know? Stuff that doesn't seem important, or things we skip over because we're trying to economize words and get away from the terminal and clock out. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with that. I've done it hundreds of times myself. What I want now is everything, even the stuff that doesn't seem important enough to write it down, okay?"

So he talks, and he has a startling memory for details, it seems. Not just individuals who came down to grab supplies, but the franchises they represented, the things they talked about on the way to the bays where their storage was kept, how many cigarettes he smoked on the way. He remembers, it seems, the gangways he traveled in order, the lights that were out, which maintenance closet he pulled the bulbs from and roughly what time it was when it he was doing it.

Bobby says, "Round about ten, I leave the checkpoint. By ten, things get mighty quiet down here. Most of the franchises have stocked for the next day--they get it all out of the way around the same time, as a courtesy to me, you know. They know it's just Bobby Diggs on the big O. If they're coming down at odd times, they give me a call and tell me they're on the way so they don't have to wait. I always start the round on the hour." Bobby shakes his head, as though he's anticipating a criticism. "I know, they teach you in the Marines to stagger your sweeps so's you keep the enemy guessing. Well, this ain't the Marines, boys. This is marginally security, but mostly customer service. If I'm predictable, the folk from up Garden way know they can show up at five before or ten before the hour and I'll be back in just a minute without having to cut short my round. It only looks like a flawed system when something bad happens, like last night."

Ray understands what Bobby's telling him and the justification for it, but he makes a mental note anyway. The suspect pool just became necessarily less clever or lucky. All they had to be was observant. "Go ahead."

"I swept passage four, where there are two bays and a bunch of storage closets for ship materials. Standard procedure is to pop the lock, shine a light in, listen for suspicious sounds, then move on. Maybe a minute per bay. Back up passage three toward the front of the ship, around the concourse against the outer hull, which takes me all the way to starboard, where it intersects with the corridor past the munitions dump, where Rodriguez and Kilgore were. I waved to them through the observation window in the blast door, but they didn't notice me, and they sure as cathedral bells weren't going to hear me unless I hit the comm, and that seemed like a little too much bother just for a howdy, you understand. I jogged left to sweep back forward down passage nine, figuring I'd hit ten on the next go. I *do* try to randomize my sweep patterns, even if I don't alternate the times I do them.

"So I peeked in 950, which is kitty corner right between passage eight and nine as you're moving back toward the front of the ship. Sections 949 to 945 are ship storage closets, narrow cubbies running along the outside of the 944 bay, get me? I hit 944 at 10:45 or so, swept my card and opened the door."

Bobby Diggs pauses, sucks long and hard on the end of his cigarette.

"And you saw the body when you flashed your light," Ray prompts him.

Diggs tilts his head sideways, considers Ray with one eye, wide, unblinking. "That's what I put in my report, yes sir."

Rodriguez nudges him with his knee. "But that isn't what really happened."

"Boy gonna think I'm crazy."

"What happened?" Ray says.

Diggs looks away, stares at his feet, not moving except to piston his cigarette back and forth between lips and thigh, where he rests his arm. "You been in the Mes, Mr. Marlowe? You got that look about you. If not the Mes, you seen action. That's plain enough."

Ray nods slowly. "Four years in and around Wadi Wadi."

"Tent City," Diggs mumbles, nostalgic. "I did a six month rotation there, but spent most of my time south and east, Wadi Gore, we called it. The main push toward Baghdad, Big B. Some fierce, fierce combat in that zone. Nights sleeping with your chem gear in hand, your bio gear on the floor, your rifle propped against the table by your head. All night long you're taking mortars; they sound like rumbling thunder the way it used to roll down the mountainside in Georgia, north of Dalton, where I'm from. And you know they're aiming for the comm shack or the ammo dump or the motor pool, but we're always moving them around. And we don't know how good their intel is, but we do know how bad their aim is, and between the two, we know it's just a matter of time before they drop a shell right in the middle of the tent. That happened, too, an old Russian surplus mortar, must have been twenty, thirty years old. Came through the tent like a stone, with a ripping sound that scared the living bejesus out of me and Krueger and Shireman. Hit the floor with a whump and just sat there, doing nothing. Shireman says, 'Hey, it's a dud, man. It's a dud. Toss it outside.' And I'm like, '*You* pick it up and toss it outside, motherfucker.' We argued about who was gonna do it for ten minutes, and here comes Sergeant Buff, who'd slept through the whole dratted thing. He rolls out of his bunk, boy don't say a word, just gets up, grabs this mortar like it's a library book and pitches it out the front flap.

"You know how it gets, just like that. When you can grab an unexploded shell and toss it around like it's just another thing. So much clutter. And you don't think about calling the specialists to cart it away, because they're gonna ask questions and ask you file a report, and help them fill sandbags to stack around the damned thing while they disarm it, and the next thing you know it's morning and you're on duty and you haven't got a lick of sleep. So you just take care of it yourself.

"And somewhere in all this mess, if you live long enough, you develop that sense like Sergeant Buff, see? Shireman telling me that it was a dud, and the two of us knowing between us that it was a dud because we was still talking about it, wasn't the same as *believing* it. We was too scared. We didn't have the faculties to think clearly, to sense when everything was all right and when it wasn't, not then. But we got to that place, we came to know, to tell, to taste an ambush in the air or feel in our bones when something big was going down before we even got the word to gear up or to know from the texture of the darkness when we were alone and when there was some Kurd sapper right outside the wire with a homemade popper strapped to his chest. You learn to use them senses God gave us all, but most men don't even know are there. Sixth sense, seventh, whatever, right? You just know.

"When I opened the door to 944, Mr. Marlowe, I just knew. It was like the breath of the devil up against my cheek, just like in the Mes. There was *something*, and I couldn't tell what. I didn't have no sidearm, just a flashlight and my churning guts, and I went in there anyway." Diggs utters an explosive laugh, harsh and castigating. "I must've looked like those old movie reels, like Buckwheat. I think my 'fro was standing straight up, half a meter off my head in all directions. And I'm thinking my eyes must be so big and so white they've got to be shinin' bright as kliegs. And on top of that, I've got this flashlight telling anybody with a gun and the

ability to hit a barn door right where I'm standing."

Diggs swings around, his face naked with a sort of supplication. "After I found that boy, I looked for the man that done it. Armed or not, I pounded the aisles--all of them. Shaking like a lost kitten in a snowstorm, too. 'Cause I could hear him, I thought. I could hear him *breathing*. I could hear him shuffling his feet, like a rasp against the deckplate, but distant, you know? Like I was hearing it from outside the bay or through the wall. But I couldn't ever get no closer to him, and after a few minutes I remember that I left the bay door open and provided him a nice, tidy exit. That's when I went for Kilgore and Rodriguez and set the whole circus in motion. I thought it might give us a chance to catch him, even if it was a slim one. But I guess he was gone by then."

Ray swallows hard, kicking back the lump that's tried to creep up his throat and suffocate him. "Bobby, did you touch the body? Even just to check for a pulse?"

He's thinking about Nomar's ongoing process of the samples obtained from Micah Uytdehaage's corpse.

"Didn't need to. I could see he was dead. And if he weren't dead, sir, he wouldn't have been thanking me sincerely for saving him at that point."

"That's okay," Ray says, trying to smile. "I didn't touch the body either."

Kilgore shivers violently. "That's creepy. You really think he was still there? I mean, the killer, right there in the room with you? A guy who could do that to a kid? That creeps me out. I would have just had a freaking heart attack right there on the spot. The big stiffy, I'm telling you, swear to God."

"I don't think nothing," Diggs retorts quietly. "It could have just been my imagination after seeing that kid all tore up. I ain't the first guy to have seen something like that and had flashbacks to combat. That's why I left that out of my report. Security don't want to read about what's going on in my gut. They want evidence. A footprint, a handcuffed suspect, some spit they can pull the DNA out of. I didn't have none of those."

"We understand," Ray says. And they do, each one of them, the way the brain leaps into overdrive and sensory input becomes confused with memories, with specters dredged up from the past. "You did everything that was expected of you."

Diggs snorts, expelling a jet of smoke from his nostrils. "Yeah. Tell that to the boys in blue out there manning my desk, walking my rounds two by two, all but strip searching the cargo yuks down from the franchises. They look at me with those grim faces that say Bobby Diggs screwed up. Bobby Diggs got himself the cushiest gig on the whole ship and he messed it up. If this duty was so soft, how come nobody else wanted it? How come it got dumped on me because I don't got as much ship time as some of the others? Well, these rent-a-flatfoot pricks can *have* it as far as I'm concerned. I'll go play on the Garden for a couple of weeks, sip me some espresso and eye rich bitch titties."

Ray sorts through his pocket and pulls out a scrap of paper and a pen. He quickly scrawls their room number and comm id and hands it to Bobby Diggs. "Chief Becker hasn't said anything about transferring you off this duty. If it means anything, I don't think he's disappointed with your performance. This is just a political gesture--to show the passengers that things are still under control." He points at the paper in Bobby's hand. "And since you're going to be here, that's our contact information. You see or hear anything strange, or you remember something you haven't told us, you give me ring, okay? Day or night, one of us will be around to take the call."

Kilgore winks, smiling. "Can you dig it, Diggsy?"

"Man, don't make me bust you up." Then, to Ray, "I'll keep you in mind, Mr. Marlowe. You're gonna catch this guy, right?"

"I'm going to do my best."

But Diggs isn't happy with that answer. His gaze bores into Ray's eyes, his jaws set firmly. "I ain't no officer, sir. I do what I'm told--always have. But I keep my eyes open and pay attention to the lie of the land so to speak. There's something that's not right about this. It gives me the heebies; I ain't ashamed to admit that."

A nod, that's all Ray gives him, just enough to show the warning was heard. "You're not the only one."

"You watch your back, Mr. Marlowe."

With that, Ray whistles for Nomar, and they leave Bobby Diggs to walk the deck.

They arrive back on the Garden a little after midnight. Kilgore makes some noises about it being too late for proper carousing, like it's a duty he's itching to perform, but shuts himself up when they find a sec-o waiting outside their door. The man sees them coming and snaps to attention.

"Commander Marlowe?"

Ray suppresses a groan. Is there anybody Becker *hasn't* told about his unexpected rank inflation? But that's only a small part of the sudden stab of dread that pierces his chest. Most of it is a sense of *what now?* Where's the body this time?

He waves the guy off before he can do something silly like salute. "What is it?" he demands.

"Chief Becker asked me to deliver a package to you." The sec-o produces a rectangular lump wrapped in plain brown paper, tied off with packing twine. Ray's name, sans rank, is printed on the top in a dark, blocky hand. "He said you would know what to do with it."

Without knowing its contents, Ray suspects that he will. The handwriting is familiar to him, though he hasn't seen it in years. It's Jack Holcomb's. R's that look like n's. Once upon a time, it had driven him nearly out of his mind.

He takes the package quickly, without comment. When he moves, its contents clink, like the sound of stone on stone, like the muddy chatter of a shale hillside collapsing on itself.

Old Jack thinks of everything. Ray doesn't know whether to be heartened or annoyed by this. Until he receives further instructions, though, he thinks he's going to opt for annoyed.

Ray dismisses the sec-o with a wave and lets them into the their quarters. Nomar bounds past him and springs up onto the counter. He begins pacing back and forth in front of the diagnostic terminal like he can't wait to upload his newly gathered cigarette data, courtesy of Bobby Diggs. Ray wonders briefly if it's possible to get a mechanized rat hooked on nicotine. That would be just his luck, to have a chemically addicted drone on his hands.

"So what's in the box, boss," Kilgore asks.

Ray tosses the package onto the closest table, where it slides a short distance, then settles with a mind jarring

tinkle of its contents.

"Emergency supplies."

"An answer that tells me nothing. You catch onto this officer routine quick." Kilgore drops into a chair at the table and grabs the box. He shakes it a few times, holding it up to his ear like a Christmas present. "Sounds breakable. Okay, sounds already broken."

To Rodriguez: "Make me some coffee, Corporal. You want some coffee, Ray?"

"I'll make it." But first, he settles Nomar down, attaches the output cable and readies the server to dump the latest audio and nicotine tinged files in their own directory.

"Oh, Rodriguez will do it. You probably wouldn't wash your hands first."

Nomar chitters something back that no one understands, but it sounds vaguely insulting.

Kilgore continues, "I'm going to open this up."

"Be my guest, but don't expect it to be a very illuminating experience."

"You're so sexy when you're cryptic, Commander."

Ray gets Nomar squared away and ventures back across the room. He settles into a chair across the table from Kilgore. Rodriguez empties a jug of purified water into the coffee maker in the kitchen. He joins them around the package a few moments later, just as Kilgore is flicking his pocket knife through the packing twine. Beneath the wrapping paper is a flimsy cardboard container. Kilgore pops the seal on one side, tilts it up and spills a dozen or more stone rings onto the table top. They're dark, a sort of metallic blue, vaguely iridescent. The illusion of iridescence comes, in fact, from the imbedded Arabic script, etched in silver, Ray guesses, both inside and out.

"Look," Kilgore says, snorting. "Ray has a secret admirer."

Ray picks up the ring that has rolled closest to him, holds it between thumb and forefinger and examines it against the overhead light. Meteoric stone, he supposes. Inscribed with incantations. He shakes his head and jams the thin, cool band onto his right hand.

Kilgore continues to shake the box, but nothing else falls out. For good measure, he turns it over so he can peer inside. "But she didn't leave a note. That's pretty rude."

Rodriguez rolls one of the rings around in his palm, examining it from various angles, obviously intrigued.

"Put it on," Ray says. "Both of you. Pick one and put it on."

Kilgore shuffles through the pile, finding one that looks wide enough to fit his stubby fingers. "I guess it's more interesting than a unit patch."

Ray scoops up the ones that remain and shovels them into his pocket.

"What are they for?" Rodriguez asks.

"For protection."

Before Kilgore can come up with a witty rejoinder: "From what?"

From having your bones liquefied by a pissed off demigod, Ray almost says. For an instant, he flashes back to Ba'dai, to Whitfield and the others collapsing like discarded garments, puddles of vacated flesh. Maybe Holcomb wasn't a complete asshole. Maybe he'd learned a lesson or two in the desert after all. Not that this gesture mitigated in any way Ray's desire to punch him in the skull.

"What's all this sand jockey mumbo-jumbo mean?" Kilgore, subtle as a hand grenade. "I mean, I know sand jockey mumbo-jumbo when I see it."

Ray just shrugs.

But Rodriguez continues to turn the ring over on his finger, tracing the words, his lips moving. He glances up. "For the terror that comes by night."

Silence. Kilgore purses his lips. "That's a little weird."

But Rodriguez looks only at Ray, says once again, "Protection from what?"

Ray is exhausted, suddenly buried under the weight of day, under the weight of his entire life. A bubbling cauldron of questions roils inside him, lots of issues he doesn't seem to glimpse clearly. Holcomb who doesn't seem surprised by recent events. So unsurprised that he has given Sorensen or Becker this little time bomb package well in advance, its ticking little mindjob clock winding down from the moment they launched. The fact that he's on a ship bound for New Holyoke--the exact same New Holyoke where an ancient Terran artifact was just transported. All of the non-coincidence around dead Micah Uytdehaage. Was the CIU getting him away from the desert at all, or just setting him up in another place and another time?

And on top of that, he still doesn't know what to do about Emma. And there's Ziggy to contend with, who about now is probably pissing acid because he thinks Ray has gone AWOL, which means that Nina knows, and Nina is probably out of her mind with worry given the grapevine of rumor that informs the ship of bizarre happenings like murders in the sub-decks. Now Rodriguez and Kilgore who deserve to know something about the mess he has enlisted them in, but all he's got to give them is half-baked theories and mystical crap piles and crackpot reminiscences they're not going to believe anyway. Too many loose ends. Too many unanswered questions, and he doesn't seem to have the time to deal with any of them in a proper way.

He wonders if this is what it's like to be an officer all the time. If so, is it too late to turn down his commission?

Ray lets his shoulders sag. "Ask me tomorrow, Rodriguez."

Which is a surrender of sorts. Which is completely unfair to them, and possibly dangerous as well. He's already lost men because they weren't handed the knowledge and tools with which to defend themselves from the unknown.

Kilgore pushes against Rodriguez's shoulder. "The coffee's ready. Go get it."

Rodriguez stares at him for a moment, dumbfounded, then springs away. He creates a thundershower of crockery in the kitchen.

Kilgore levels a disgusted glare at Ray. "All due respect, sir, but I don't give a shit if you don't want to talk about it. I don't give a shit about your need-to-know ideas or emergency contingencies. You need to tell us what's going on before I say to hell with this reassignment. We can't help you unless you give us something to

work with."

This is the type of thing Marine sergeants have been doing with officers for five hundred years. Ray can't help but blink at him, dumbfounded himself. So this is what it feels like to be on the receiving end of an officer-sergeant ass reaming. He chuckles lightly in spite of himself, realizes that 'chuckling' is way too macho a description for it. By God, he's giggling. Giggling like he's losing his mind. Or do you cackle when your mind goes? He doesn't know.

Rodriguez returns and slides a blistering mug of dark coffee into his hand.

Fucking Marines, Ray thinks. And he tells them. All of it.

Chapter Eight

The event that at some point in the night came to be called Operation Boogey Man (alternately, Operation Booger Man, Booty Man, Boogie Down Man) does not begin as smoothly as Ray would have liked. In the morning, with the three of them still scrubbing sleep out of their eyes and the lacquer of old coffee off their tongues, it becomes painfully apparent that Kilgore and Rodriguez had never qualified in Covert Urban Civilian Fashion. They go through much of their wardrobes of loud, baggy shirts and khaki cargo pants with too many utilitarian pockets and manage in none of the iterations to look like anything except Marines gearing up for espionage activities. Ray would have accepted a Marines-on-shore-leave theme since that fit with their backup cover story, but they couldn't even pull *that* off without looking like they had stuffed blocks of explosive putty in their pockets and kept pistols strapped under their arms. (This was partially due to the fact that Kilgore insisted on actually keeping a pistol there.)

Later in the morning, there is shopping carried out by a glowing ensign intermediary dispatched by Becker--at Ray's request--to fend off the impending mission-threatening crisis. She breathlessly collects sizes, crawls around Kilgore and Rodriguez with a tape measure, tickles inseams with a zest that is somewhere between professional and lascivious, then disappears for better than two hours with their cred chips. When she finally returns, there are bags to open, wads of crepe paper to wad up and toss away. Loads of grunting and I'm-not-wearing-that protestations. Ray issues a whole raft of threatening sounding orders about the fact that mingling with poofs requires looking like poofs. In return, he's threatened with a mutiny that is only put off by the ensign's declaration that just looking at the two Marines in their urban camouflage makes her feel rather weak in the knees.

By noon, Kilgore and Rodriguez have drawn up a detailed map of the Garden and its assorted attractions. They argue over deployment strategies, over zones of control and population assimilation and control measures. They chuckle about redefinitions of the term "Fields of Fire". They pull up confidential ship demographic and transaction history information and demarcate a ten section square block which they label Biddy Central, a sort of No Man's Land given over to *Paraclete's* aged matron and widower set. It is Avoid At All Costs territory, saved for the extremest of exigencies, the most suicidal of intel obtainment tactics. Finally, they agree to rendezvous back at the suite by ten for standard debriefing, then troop out, leaving Ray alone at last.

Ray has coordinated the tactical removal of a battalion strength force of entrenched Russoturk regulars by grossly undermanned allied ground and air forces from four different countries and twelve branches of the military with less general aggravation.

For his part, Ray changes into fresh clothes that are nearly identical to the ones he wore the day before. He takes three minutes to hack the telephony index and track down the private comm nodes of the Whiston compound. He pings Emma's room with a transmission encrypted lightly enough to hide his contact information and boggle most private industry unauthorized descrambling software.

He tells himself that he does this because his ability to prosecute the tasks of his job requires it of him, because he needs to stay close to the Whistons. He doesn't want to think about it any other way at this moment, because the wall of deception and lies he is erecting between them is unconscionable otherwise. This much, at least, he owes to dead and mutilated Micah.

He doesn't even want to calculate the debt he'll owe Emma for so many lies, so much manipulation.

Her voice sounds thin, drawn when she answers. He's sent the call as voice only and immediately wishes he would have authorized a vid signal

"Meet me for lunch," he says.

"Ray?"

"I can be at Frankie V's in five minutes. I'll get us a table."

Hesitation, then sadness, muffled by electrons. "I'd love that, but I can't."

"You're angry with me."

"I *am* angry with you. You abandoned me in the middle of the night without anything like an acceptable explanation." For just a moment she is growling, spurned, arch, but either can't or won't maintain it. "But that's not why I can't meet you. Amah is furious that I've been entertaining strange men, common sailors no less, who haven't shown her the courtesy of submitting to a proper introduction. Frederick, of course, isn't helping matters, and has been saying the most scandalous and misleading things about you. I'm afraid she's generally more prone to believing his side of things than mine."

"I've performed a few clandestine extractions in my time," Ray says, joking. "And if I had to get rough with your brother again to make good our escape, that would just be a bonus."

"Frederick isn't here."

"What are you telling me?"

"Etiquette, Ray."

He mulls this strange word, trying to make some sense of it. "Oh. You want me to pick you up. Like a date. Knock on the front door, meet the guardian, all of that."

Emma laughs lightly. "That *is* the way it's traditionally done."

"Do I bring something? Flowers or candy or something?"

"When you come for dinner, you can do that. It isn't required when you're taking me out. Unless, of course, you're bringing things for me, as a token of apology for the manner in which you abandoned me. In that case, I like chocolate and you can bring as much as you like."

"So I just come down there and knock on the door, meet your Amah and we're set, right?"

"The main door, Ray. Not the one to my private room."

"I would have figured that out. Eventually." Probably would have, though not necessarily before creating some noxious inter-familial incident. He grins imagining it; it's probably just as well that she can't see him. "I'll be there in ten."

Chocolate, he remembers. "Make that fifteen."

"If you're not here in half an hour, I'm calling security."

Still smiling, he clicks off. He looks over at Nomar, standing expectantly on the kitchen counter. "Where do you find chocolate on a starship?"

The rat, of course, has a perfectly clear idea.

Exactly fifteen minutes later and a shocking amount of ship's cred lighter, he's standing on Iota-D outside the primary entrance to the Whiston suites. In one hand he holds a package wrapped in white satin cloth, frouffy with pastel ribbons and lace. He swipes the other hand against his pant leg to keep the sweat off his palms, and alternately uses it to slap at Nomar who can't seem to get it through his processing array that the chocolate extravagance is not now and never was intended for him.

He gets thing settled with Nomar in time to ignore the chipper salutation of the security system in agatho-daimon, receptive mode and pound out his arrival on the skin of the front door. It slides open at once, like she's been waiting for him.

Emma is there, bright-eyed and shimmering with an internal glow. She's an old time movie star under a soft lens. For several moments he forgets to breathe.

When he does remember, he says, "I'm punctual."

"If that's the worst of your vices, I think you might not be a complete waste of my energies."

"Am I supposed to take that as flattery?"

"Indeed. And you're supposed to say something flattering in return."

"If you get me started we'll be standing here all day." He's fairly certain he's making a fool of himself. Despite everything, just seeing her overwhelms him. "You make me feel dizzy."

Emma puts her finger to her lips, hushing him.

She mouths one word: *wonderful*.

But with a toss of her head, she indicates the space behind her. Someone listening in. He suspects this is supposed to make him feel instantly and utterly abashed, but it doesn't. Whoever it is, he owes them a debt of dignity.

So he'll have something less awkward to do, Ray thrusts the package of chocolates at her. Grins like an idiot. Emma takes it from him with the proper appreciative noises and exclamations of surprise, but she isn't really looking at the package. She's looking at Nomar, who has followed the transaction with a twitch of his nose and a less than stealthy tracking maneuver. Emma raises an eyebrow at Ray, as if to say, *Today! Today of all days, you bring the rat!* Ray just shrugs. There are certain impulses a man should not be expected to explain.

Finally, she invites him inside. Ray pauses long enough to inform Nomar that he's going to remain outside, preferably right where he is, even more preferably, without chewing on anything that looks expensive. A brief, but frenzied negotiation results in Emma unwrapping the bundle and handing over a piece of chocolate to placate him.

She leads him through a brief vestibule of white marble floors, soft wood paneling and fine Grecian urns mounted on Romanesque stone pillars, both of which, Ray suspects, are actual antiquities rather than clever reproductions thereof. Through an arched doorway is a large parlor that is everything one would expect from a Whiston family domestic space. The carpet is plush, white, dreadfully soft. There are leather chairs sprinkled about in chummy groups which break up the uncharacteristic vastness of the open room. Low bookcases neatly arranged with dark leather volumes stamped with gold lettering on the spines line two of the walls. The wall directly to Ray's right is taken up by a massive vid screen, currently dark, but bracketed on each side by fading frescoed tiles, what seem to be remnants of ancient Pompeii. A tasteful assortment of lamps and flowers, flowers hiding lamps, lamps shaped like flowers, generate a white glare that is almost dazzling.

And Ray might be tempted to be dazzled, except he suddenly remembers something Emma had said to him. About finding Micah camped out in one of these soft leather chairs, poring over a book well after bedtime. He can imagine it now, the boy's small body spread across the seat with a book propped on his chest, his gangly limbs draped over a chair's arm, his foot swinging lightly in the air, his brows furrowed as he troubles over an unfamiliar spatter of characters and ungainly word forms, unaware that he's a few scant hours from death.

There are perhaps more important things in the world than making a good impression on Emma's domestic servant or maternal guardian or whatever it was she happened to be.

Emma leads him across the room to the far corner where space has been carved out from so much opulence for a battered wicker rocking chair that looks old enough to have been transported from Terra during the original settlement of New Holyoke. The woman seated in it is no less ancient in her appearance, and she is exactly not at all what Ray expected.

She is vast, sprawling, with thick legs like industrial pistons, skin brown as burnt cocoa, trunk massive in its proportions. Her upper arms, poking out of a bright, floral print dress are slabs of wrinkled fat which droop down over her elbows like the sleeves of a bulky sweater. Her head is a squarish block seated awkwardly on broad, muscled shoulders. The chair beneath her creaks an alarming plaint as she rocks, the sound of organic materials reaching their critical stress point. Even without standing, it's apparent that she's tall, probably a hand span taller than Ray. Almost a freak of nature; a creature of awe.

Ray's first impression is that age has wrinkled her in curious patterns, but it isn't wrinkling at all, it's a fine network of ritual scars. Blackened whorls and loops crowd her arms. On her fingers are delicate stick figures that seem to dance when she moves her hands. The billowing canvasses of her cheeks are cratered spirals spinning away from a central point, ever widening in arcs that disappear behind the curve of her ears.

"Most men stare the first time," the woman says, her voice rich and deep, projected like a roll of thunder into the room's quiet.

She has been doing something with her hands which involves thin strips of plaited bark interwoven in a broad, dun colored disk. Basket weaving, Ray realizes. The emerging disk of what will be the base is spread out on her wide thighs, trailing curled strips like creeper vines down her legs. She lifts her eyes to him, stunning wells of darkness, black on black, but shining, perceptive, quick.

"You look, but you don't gawk, Mr. Marlowe. These are better manners than you've displayed toward this family so far. You had a good mother, then, but her handiwork has been blunted by the influence of less tactful teachers."

"I'm sorry," Ray says reflexively.

"For what reason, young man? For learning poor lessons? For manhandling poor, earnest Frederick after he let his temper get the better of him? For compromising the virtue of a young woman in the middle of the night when you thought no one was watching? Or for just for being a man in general?"

Not a good start. "Maybe for the insensitivity of others, ma'am."

Beside him, Emma shifts nervously from one foot to the other. In a small voice, she says, "Amah, this is Ray."

The woman snorts, but sets her craftwork aside. "I know who he is. I'm just giving him a dose of his own medicine, little Emma. Rude behavior breeds rudeness in return."

"I had no intention of causing difficulties for you," Ray says evenly.

"I am fully aware of your intentions, Mr. Marlowe, but what you may intend and what the actual consequences of your actions may be do not necessarily correspond. This family has seen better days than the ones we've been granted of late. Trial stacked on trial. First Emma and Frederick's mother, then Micah, and now here you are, a distraction at best. At worst--well, who's to say?"

Apparently, this is a woman who has no trouble expressing what she thinks. "I realize the timing is unfortunate."

"Do you?"

Ray hesitates over his phrasing. "I've been apprised of the current situation."

"Do you think so?"

He can't tell what she means by this question. "Yes."

Amah frowns. "You have no idea of the complexities of the current situation. The affairs of the Whiston family are beyond your ken. That you would even suppose to know is foolish and preposterous. Are you a fool, Mr. Marlowe?"

Emma draws a sharp breath. "Amah, you *promised*."

But the accusation still hangs in the air between them. Ray peers down at the old woman, his jaw set. "You don't know anything about me."

"Indeed. At least, no more than you know about the Whistons. You should not find yourself confusing what you believe with what is true--what you perceive with what is actual. The ability to separate truth from fiction is the foundation of courtesy."

"Courtesy?" He speaks the word like he doesn't know what it means.

"Amah, please!"

The old woman levels a glare at Ray, but something about her seems to soften, relent. "I did promise. Not to be hard on you, not to remind you that the ways of the family are old and strange to some. It's not my place to tell a girl of Emma's age how to conduct her affairs, and you are obviously a man of the world who knows how to comport himself properly, eh? You don't need my approval of your business, not when you're perfectly capable of learning the hard truths for yourself. But I'm old, and I measure by standards that are no longer in fashion." She fixes Ray with a final, penetrating look from her dark eyes, her wells of knowledge. "Times change, Mr. Marlowe. Standards change. But the Whistons do not. We are as we have always been, and what is demanded of those who would flutter near to our flame is respect. Perhaps in time you will come to see that this is true--if you have the fortitude to endure."

Emma intervenes before Ray can respond. "Ray just wants to take me to lunch."

A shake of the head. "Is that what you want, Mr. Marlowe?"

All that you want, she means.

Any time now, he should begin to get properly angry, to pull his sergeant's voice out of mothballs and use it to defend himself. But he can't. Doesn't even want to, in fact, because of Emma. He's already forced her to bear the weight of his conflicting interests once. He is not going to do it again.

He does his best to smile amiably. "If you don't mind."

Amah purses her lips. "None of my business."

"Then I think I'll go," Emma says, hardly more than a whisper. "The children have been fed, of course, and Leela is putting the younger ones down for their nap. I've told them not to disturb you. I should be back in time for their afternoon lessons."

"I trust Mr. Marlowe will help you keep track of the time." Pregnant pause, almost amused. "And return you in decent order."

Ugh.

Emma sweeps toward her and kisses her cheek warmly, on the verge of glee, or imitating glee to dissuade her from changing her mind. The old woman clutches at her in an embrace that resembles a mudslide as Emma whispers what Ray guesses must be gratitude or groveling in her ear. Amah's heavy lidded gaze never leaves him, claws at him like an accusation of rape.

Impending rape at best, he wants to remind her, but doesn't.

And Miss I-don't-*really*-wear-the-pants-in-this-household Nanny might just be rudely surprised by whose name would appear in the security report as the perpetrator of any sexual aggression that might occur.

Bottom line: he is starting to remember why it always seemed easier to just pay for sex rather than going after slutty, sticky, relationship-minded Air Force chicks.

Emma disentangles herself from the old woman's embrace, smiling again. She springs at Ray, takes his hand and draws him out of the parlor, through the vestibule and out the front door so rapidly he might as well have been sucked through a wormhole.

With the door sealed behind them, Ray says, "That was certainly pleasant. I would like to thank you for subjecting me to such pleasantness. Really. I mean that."

"Oh, listen to you," Emma says, giggling, beaming, happy just to have escaped, Ray imagines. She bumps her shoulder playfully against him. "It isn't as though she doesn't have a point. You haven't exactly gone out of your way to make a good impression with my family."

Flabbergasting! "Freddy got exactly what he deserved. Less than he deserved, actually. At least where I come from."

"Don't let him hear you call him that. He hates it."

"I thought I was trying to be convivial," Ray says, innocent and impish. "And that's beside the fact that she practically accused me of sneaking into your room to seduce you, among other things."

They reach the lift and Emma punches the keypad to call the car. Nomar follows after them, sniffing at the air for more as-yet-unperceived confections.

"Are you saying you had other intentions?"

"Not at all, but there's no way she could know that. Innocent until proven guilty and so on."

The car arrives and they step inside. Emma looks up at him as they begin to move. "You'd be surprised what Amah knows, Ray. And you'd do well to remember that she can find out whatever she desires to."

Her tone is tinged with a distressingly reverential awe. Ray frowns hearing it. "She probably just checked the security log. Assumptions beyond that are fairly straightforward."

Emma only shrugs. *If that's what you want to believe.*

What he wants to believe is that Amah is a cranky old harridan mortified by her advancing age and her increasingly faulty carbon-based husk and takes her disappointments out on the young men her stunning daughter by proxy chooses to bring home. He *wants* to believe that she has been alone and bitter and charged with the task of raising someone else's youngsters for so long that her bulldog defense of their interests and innocence has staggered from competent to obsessive and is now well on its way to psychosis.

The truth is that if he had been Emma's father and had caught some gauche young turk sneaking into her bedroom in the middle of the night, the chances were good that he'd be in lockup for the unauthorized discharge of firearms in the direction of individuals who had not granted their express, written consent to being mistaken for shooting range targets.

Ray can only shake his head and say, "You know, if you weren't so pretty, this wouldn't have been a problem."

"I'm not just pretty, Ray. I'm perfect. You never had a chance."

He, at least, knows better than to disagree.

They proceed up to the Garden Level, transitioning from the Iota-D lift to one of the public lifts, and arrive at Frankie V's in time to avoid the press of the lunch crowd. Ray likes it here; it's his favorite of all the shipboard franchises, and only partially because of Frankie's under the table food deal, and even less so because of the faux Mafioso/old New York Italian bistro theme to the décor with its red checkered tablecloths and dimly lit, smoky interior where the booths are tall enough to hide you from view and thick enough to stop an assassin's bullet. He likes it because Frankie is actually Ed Goins from Cleveland, a part Irish, part German Protestant who has to die his dishwater brown hair black before he can slick it, and has to concentrate to look cagey and dangerous rather than bursting into wide, toothy smiles. When he doesn't think about his speech, his accent is flat, drawl-less Midwestern, which is to say, not accented at all except for a slight tendency to turn "you're" into *yer* and "for" into *fer*.

In Ray's line of work, finding someone who can make a successful go at assuming a role to which he is entirely unsuited and despite his copious shortcomings is distinctly comforting.

Inside, Frankie is playing maitre d' to a rapidly thinning clientele, tall and stiff in a shining dark suit with lapels that are too wide and a red silk shirt beneath open at the collar to show his (dyed) chest hair. He spots Ray and scampers across the dining room, lunges for Ray's outstretched hand and circles it in a double-fisted, vigorous shake.

"Hey! Mr. Marlowe, *benevenutti*, eh? Carlo said yous was gonna stop by for a little somethin' this afternoon. How's it treating you?" Frankie isn't paying attention to Ray at all, but rolling his eyes up and down Emma's curves with lascivious attention to detail. When he's finished his survey, he cocks his head to Ray, wide smiles, winks. "Forget I asked. It's treating you good, real good, I see."

He's having too much fun for Ray to tell him to can it.

"You want a table or a boot, Ray?"

Boot? But Frankie gives him the appropriate hand signal, a snap wave toward the back of the dining room and the *booths* crowded under pools of low and flickering yellow lights.

"Booth," Ray says distinctly.

Frankie gives him the wink again--Gotcha. He snaps his fingers at someone Ray can't see, presumably a waiter, and draws them deeper into the dining hall. Positioned on Ray's right, opposite Emma, Frankie leans close so he can speak almost mouth to ear.

"Hey, tell me honestly. I've been working on the accent, watching some old movies and stuff. Is it over the top? I think it's probably over the top but none of my guys will say so."

Frankie/Ed's "guys" are mostly Koreans still trying to learn more than a passing familiarity grade school English. They wouldn't recognize *over the top* if it fell on them, and would be close to the last speakers of the language in human space to criticize anyone else's mangled accent. Koreans are generally way too polite to give you a straight answer anyway.

"Just a little," Ray whispers back.

"I knew it. How about the *benevenutti*?"

"That's a nice touch, but I don't know what it means."

"Good morning'," Frankie says guardedly. "At least, I think so. I was hoping you could tell me."

"I'll look it up, get back to you."

"Sure, sure. You gonna use the rat to pay?"

"Not today. I'm trying to make a good impression here, but you'd be doing me a favor if you showed him the kitchen and put him to work."

Frankie sighs wistfully. "Ah, *l'amour*!"

"That's French."

"*Amore*?"

"I think so."

"Good deal. And by the way, a couple of the other guys--system vets--have been in looking for you. Chief Zighowser is pissed enough to skin cats. I'm supposed to pass the word if I see you."

"You haven't."

A nice, Mafia shrug. "I seen nothin'."

Frankie steps aside so they can fold themselves into the booth, well apart from the dozen or so other customers in the room. "Gino will be with in a moment. Might I recommend the house special?"

Ray doesn't know what the special is, but he nods anyway.

Frankie bows out, nudging Nomar with his foot and jerking his head back toward the kitchen. It's a signal Nomar understands and obeys with only the slightest hesitation. The two of them disappear like old confederates slinking off to plot a bank heist.

Emma watches them go, then leans forward with her elbows on the table. "You come here often?"

"Frankie takes care of me."

"He isn't Italian, I don't think."

"Don't tell him that. You'll destroy his confidence." Ray presses close, lowers his voice. "This is his first franchise voyage. He's made amazing leaps since Terra, believe me."

Then, "You've never been here before?"

"Frederick doesn't like pasta, and he despises American kitsch."

Ray lifts an eyebrow. "And you never go anywhere without his escort?"

"Not if they can stop me."

Like the other morning, she means. It sits there plainly between them, but Ray doesn't know how to make her actually say it, recognize it.

"Your family seems to be heavily invested in protecting you." Big sign, red letters, neon flash: Watch Out for Thin Ice. Ray prepares to wince as she cuts him down.

But she doesn't. Emma sucks in her lower lip, blinks slowly. "I'm the baby."

"They let you go off to the university," he points out.

More lip chewing. She shifts her eyes away. "That's not completely accurate. I went off to school. Frederick retrieved me from school."

"Meaning?"

"I had enough money to get to Stratiskaya Daransk and get by for six months. I don't control my trust until I'm twenty-five, so it wasn't hard for Frederick to block access to my account. The university expelled me for failure to pay my bill."

"And your mother?"

"Mother's been ill my entire life, sometimes better other times worse. The severity of her condition is a pretense to keep people from talking about family affairs." Emma frowns, then tries to shake it off with a grim laugh. "I shouldn't be telling you this. It sounds like I'm trying to scare you off."

"Unfortunately for you, I'm not that easily frightened."

"That's what I'm hoping." Immediately, she puts her hand to her face. "God, that makes me sound so mercenary. It's not that bad, Ray, really. I don't need to be rescued."

Ray reaches for her hand, uncovers her eyes. "It's okay."

A moment later, Gino is there, dark and burly, bona fide Italian, bustling them through wine lists and menu recommendations and pronouncements on the virtues of *linguini al sugo di pescatore* and Sicilian mostacciolo. He's a whirlwind of jovial service, gregarious high pressure sales, winking too much, slapping shoulders, impressing them with the sense of how deeply insulted he'll be if they don't take each one of his menu selections to heart.

Once he's gone, Ray says, "At least that explains the reception I received."

"From Amah, you mean?"

"Yes. She's afraid I'm going to try to steal you away, and that you're more than willing to be stolen."

"And that's not what you want?"

Ouch. "Too early to call it."

"Why?"

He chuckles uncomfortably. "Because I snore. Because my feet smell bad. Because I sleep with my socks on and like to wear the same pair of skivvies two or three days in a row. I have a whole list of reasons for possible rejection, any one of which I fully suspect will bring to screeching to your senses as soon as you become aware of them. How's that?"

But she pinches her brow, troubled. "You said the other night that I was out of your league. You're wrong about that, you know. I'm not like--I mean, I've been very sheltered. Most of my life has been spent on a frontier colony with fewer than a million people. I'm not sophisticated; I haven't traveled. I'm not who you think I am, not who anybody thinks I am."

"Even Amah?" Ray says, arching an eyebrow.

Emma laughs. "I used to tell people that in many ways, Amah is more Whiston than I am, than any of us are. Which shouldn't surprise anyone. Amah has held the family together for years, longer than I've even been alive. Amah and her clan."

It makes her uncomfortable to say these things, like telling secrets. She won't meet his gaze, the way she always does when she talks about the family, about Frederick, about anything Whiston. Ray doesn't prompt her. He doesn't need to. He gets the sense that she's been waiting to tell someone, anyone, for a very long time.

"You've got to understand, Amah's family has been with us for as long as there's been a Whiston family, at least in the way people think of us now. As financial juggernauts, I mean. They've been part of us from the beginning, when great, great--supply your own multiple--grandfather rescued them from a plague stricken Polynesian island. This is classic family history stuff, Ray, part of the grand tradition. Grandfather Elliot George sells everything he owns in Old Boston, which isn't much, but enough to purchase a majority share in a trading vessel called *Hesperides* aimed for China. Since he has nothing to his name but prospects, he convinces the minor partners to let him accompany the ship's crew as a trade negotiator. It's by all accounts a disastrous voyage. The hired captain falls ill before they round the tip of Tierra del Fuego, and grandfather is required to take over. Of course, he knows almost nothing about ocean seamanship, just what he's picked up around the harbor, and then there are storms and diseases and long periods of calm so that by the time they sight land, they're thousands of miles off course and half of them have perished. But they're lucky, I guess,

those who remain, because they eventually come across a small south seas island.

"They draw the *Hesperides* into a shallow harbor and man the jackboats to search for water, food, citrus--anything they can find to replenish their catastrophically depleted stores. The bad news is that they've arrived on this island at the worst possible time. The indigenous peoples, the Ma'huru and the Dag Maoudi, are entering the final act of a genocidal conflict in which the Ma'huru have the upper hand because they've been poisoning the wells of the Dag Maoudi. Grandfather Elliot learns about what's going on, puts the pieces together, and also discovers that the Dag Maoudi are sailors of some considerable skill. He exchanges the might of 18th century weaponry and a promise to end the plague for enough Dag Maoudi sailors to replace the crew he's lost and enough stores to get them to China. The Dag Maoudi agree, and once he's done his part, they offer him Amah's ancestors--fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, old folks and newborn babies. Grandfather takes them all.

"After that, the fortunes of the *Hesperides* change. They reach China, manage an amazing series of clever negotiations and cement trade relationships. Grandfather returns to Boston heroically, and more important, on the verge of fabulous wealth. The Dag Maoudi go with him like good luck charms, adopted into the family as it were.

"They've been with us ever since. Through the transitions from trade and ship building to automobiles then aircraft then military manufacturing, now starships, the Dag Maoudi have been the one constant in the family. Amah takes her role, and her clan's history with us, very seriously. It's part of who she is, as much a personal definition as the scars she bears to celebrate her heritage."

"And she's not about to let you throw all that away in a post-adolescent fit," Ray finishes for her.

"I'm just trying to help you understand."

He's being too hard on her, he realizes. Of course he doesn't understand. He doesn't have the experience to make it part of his reality.

"So Amah has essentially taken care of family affairs since your mother became ill."

"Since father died, actually. Just before I was born."

Ray gives her a shrug. "I guess I can see why she's so invested in your success. She's been working at it for a long time. But here's what I don't get: the current Whiston fortune, as immense and gaudy as it is, is based on starship manufacture and trade--all of which is Terran based. What are you doing out on the fringes of human space, for God's sake? How the heck did your branch of the family end up on New Holyoke?"

Emma grins widely at him, as though he's said something unintentionally funny. "You know, for a suspected gold digger, you haven't done very thorough research."

"What are you talking about?"

"Ray, my family didn't 'end up on' New Holyoke. We own it. We--meaning vessels and crews in our employ--we discovered it; we went to the Congressional Forum with a request for charter and trade rights; we paid cash money for private settlement and exclusive commerce considerations with the promise that we'd get a colony up and running and shipping raw materials back to Terra within a half century. It's China all over again, you might say, and it's the dirty secret behind the Whiston Charitable Trust."

"The Trust is a tax break?" Ray barks, astounded. Then he's laughing, and she's laughing along with him. "That's clever. Insidiously so, or admirably so. I'm not quite certain which."

"You can't tell anyone, of course, and the Terran branch of the family would deny it, probably destroy you in the process. Or at least to the extent that they'd care. I think they're still angry that Grandfather Fram cut them out of the deal."

"Who'd believe it?" He slaps his palm against his forehead. "You're serious! You really own the entire planet?"

"For what it's worth. Which, for the record, isn't much at this point in time. Just enough to meet our quotas and hold onto our charter. We're still decades away from really profitable resource mining unless we can get more and highly skilled people to immigrate. Labor is the most important raw material on any new colony, especially skilled labor. That's a much less cynical way of looking at the work we do with the Trust. We take children who would otherwise be hopeless and give them a place and the necessary knowledge to flourish." She pauses briefly, develops a look of consternation. "Oh, but Ray, you understand that's just the business side of things, all this talk about ownership. New Holyoke is a legitimate colony with its own governing structure independent of the Whiston corporate aims. We are not petty tyrants ruling by executive fiat. The colony has its own local Congressional Forum that sets domestic policy, its own independent security forces, elects its own delegates to the Terran forum. The family stays completely away from the political side of it."

Nice sentiment, but naïve. "You're neglecting the fact that everyone on New Holyoke has to know that there is no colony, or at least not a financially viable one, without Whiston backing. You don't have to exert your influence explicitly, I'd imagine, for the people who depend on your good favor to do what they believe you desire. It's the way mining operations work--the way they've always worked, and that's completely beside the fact that a considerable portion of your skilled and educated population owes their livelihood to the beneficence of the Trust."

"Cultural power is a different animal entirely, Ray. If you believe that we don't wish to exert some influence over the manner in which the colony develops, then you're mistaken. We have our own interests in New Holyoke, both financial and otherwise, but it benefits no one if the people aren't free to be human, free to develop into something grander than they have been before."

"That sounds very utopian," Ray says.

"Not utopian, darling. Human. It's the nature of mankind to rise, to desire elevation. Sometimes, I think we forget that and are content to just expand rather than improve. We have striven for long years to create an environment where that can occur--and occur profitably, of course."

"But not politically, eh?"

Emma rolls her eyes at him. "If you like, imagine us as akin to the British royal family--good tabloid gossip material, but not really relevant to most people's lives."

She's either very naïve or New Holyoke is a very different sort of place than Ray has ever been.

"It must have created quite the local stir when you ran away."

Emma is suddenly serious again, verging on bitter. "I'm sure Frederick found a way to spin it to his advantage. He probably announced I was off joining a convent or something, just so I'll be more subject to humiliation when we return. I'm certain that any rumors of impropriety or tawdriness will be directed at me alone so as not to soil the family's reputation."

"So any plans I might harbor to smash him in the mouth probably wouldn't help matters, is that what you're saying?"

"Probably not, no."

Ray gives her hand a squeeze to show her that he's joking. Mostly. "So what is Freddy's role in the great Trust?"

"You mean when he's not getting drunk and losing his temper?"

"You said it. I didn't."

She smiles weakly. "He's the primary administrator of the Trust and its charges."

"In other words, he's a high priced babysitter."

"For me and others, yes."

"Then Amah runs the household, Freddy runs the family business--what's the role they're grooming you for, Emma? Other than closet feckless dilettante slash secluded sociopath, I mean."

But she waves him off as if the question doesn't matter to her. "Something innocuous, I'm sure. But tedious, too. While I'm young, something to keep me in the public eye so I can attract a suitable match. That means public relations most likely. The simple truth is that they haven't told me yet, and apparently they haven't liked my ideas on the subject."

"And those would be?"

Emma flings her arms wide, a starlet pose. "Why, to be fabulously wealthy and decadent and die young in an exotic land surrounded by adoring and nubile devotees, of course. Is there anything else worth aspiring to?"

This is perhaps a not so subtle indication that she wants to drop the subject, so Ray lets her. He's gotten enough out of the business portion of this lunch to justify the expense on the cred pool to Becker.

"So where do I fit into these future plans?"

"You would be the High Priest, Ray, shielding my glory from the masses, worshipping at my altar, heeding my every command."

She comes across as completely earnest, so Ray nods playfully. "It's been too long since the universe has seen a well conducted theocracy."

"I'm glad you see it that way, my love."

My love. Hearing her say it sends a thrill through him like a jolt of electricity. While he marvels over her, Gino arrives with their food. He makes a big show of distributing plates and rhapsodizing over the perfection of the preparation, the presentation, the complexity of the culinary issues. All the sprawling and glorious history of Italy from trilobite dawn to this morning's news has conspired to bring them this moment, these dishes, a palate-shattering explosion of delight.

But Ray leaves his food untouched.

"What is it about you, Emma?"

She stops, fork in hand, says matter-of-factly: "I've told you. I'm perfect. Perfect for you, at least."

"You realize that you know next to nothing about me." And what you think you know is mostly lies too complex to straighten out without hurting you.

"I realize that you think I know nothing about you. I also realize that you're wrong, which is a convenient balance of power for my taste."

Ray holds his breath, lets it go slowly. "I'm wrong? How can that be, when I'm pretty sure I remember most of the things I have told you."

Barring Freddy pulling some corporate strings and hacking into the EED's classified personnel files, there's no way she can know anything else. Even then, he couldn't be certain that an accurate file with his name attached to it even exists. Well, Holcomb suggested one might exist, and Becker had seen a copy of something like his file, but he knows better than to believe anything those sources might have to say about him.

Emma, however, chooses not to elaborate, and he's afraid to press her. Instead, she says, "Just know that I'm perfect for you. That we're perfect. Nothing else really matters, does it?"

"I don't know what that means," he whispers.

"You don't have to know yet. It just *is*. You love me, and that should be all the proof you need."

How can she say that? How can she say it like it's irrefutable?

But she believes it all with a fervency so real, so tactile that to deny it would destroy her. He can only stare. Stare at her, drink her image as if he could burn her reflection into his brain if he *just doesn't take his eyes off of her*. Because it's not just irrefutable, it's true. Despite all the complications, it's not just her that feels this way. Not her alone, and he has no way of understanding it.

He scrambles through a score of thoughts, all inchoate, unrelated, asinine.

"I have something for you," he says sharply.

He roots through his pockets, looking for all the world like he's wrestling with his penis under the table, coming up with nothing but a collection of lint beneath his fingernails. Both pockets, while Emma follows his mounting desperation with a quizzical expression. He remembers his thigh pocket, the one with the zipper and the way he tended to clink on his run from his room to the confectioner for the chocolate.

He doesn't know what size she wears and can't make the estimation from looking at her fingers to the shapes in his pocket, so he grabs the whole handful and flings them on the table. Stone rings tinkle across the tabletop, clatter against the dishes. One rolls all the way to the edge against the wall, teeters then falls on its side.

Emma narrows her eyes at the shotgun pattern of the rings, then sets her fork down. She picks the one nearest to her, where it leans against her dinner plate. Like Rodriguez, she rolls it around between thumb and forefinger, holding it up to the light to examine the silver etching.

"It's a ring," she says.

"I want you to wear it." He's breathing hard. Too hard, really. "All the time."

"You got me a ring?"

"Not *that* kind of ring. Just a thing. A--"

"I see you got enough for all your girlfriends." The dreaded raised eyebrow, suggesting he has either made a major relationship blunder or is acting irrationally. Very possibly both. "What does this mean, this writing around the edges?"

Ray thinks he might be experiencing some sort of lethal medical condition. He's having trouble taking a breath that's actually deep enough to satisfy what seems to be a severe case of oxygen deprivation. He suspects his brain itself is suffocating, a billion neurons a second snuffling vacuum, pitching over with a uniform scream. The idea of actually sucking in air to say something seems idiotic to him. "It says I care about you. That I want you to be safe. Just put it on your finger. Please."

"It's on."

Painstakingly, he collects the extras, wiping them off on his pant leg before jamming them back in his pocket. The pressure in his chest subsides gradually, until he's feeling normal again.

"I've never given a woman a ring before," he offers as an explanation. "Promise me you'll wear it."

"I will, Ray."

"All the time. Until I tell you it's okay to take it off."

"All right."

He takes one last, deep breath, decides that the ship has stopped spinning on its axis, lets himself relax. The food is there, still steaming, and he's hungry. All he's had in hours--too many hours--is coffee. Ray attacks the pasta like he hasn't eaten in weeks.

In his quiet voice, he's saying: *You are such a dumbass.*

After a time, Emma asks, "Ray, why did you just give me a ring."

And because he's occupied with castigating himself for making such a disaster of it, for being such a freaking assclown, he doesn't give the proper attention to her question. Shoots the obvious response right past his neural processors, through the Dumbass Alert System and affiliated security checkpoints, straight into the output bin. He simply blurts out the first thing that pops into his forebrain. The *true* thing.

"Because I love you."

And she didn't even have to use sodium penethol to get it out of him. Had Jack Holcomb heard him, he would have busted him back down to sergeant on the spot. Then fired him. Probably had him executed just for good measure before he went off blabbing even more confidential, potentially state toppling information.

He discovers in that moment that silence really is audible. It has a sound like radio static heard through a wall. A low, empty rush against the ears.

In the next instant, though, shame blots it out, triphammers his heartbeat and he can feel *that* to the exclusion of all other senses. A thump in his fingertips, his temples, the soles of his feet. Because even that isn't the whole truth, just a piece, a sliver. Less about love than about fear. Less about Emma, than about *shed*. He can't seem to tell her anything without making it into a lie.

He lifts his eyes to her, halfway into a blanch as though he expects her to strike out at him. He deserves it.

Emma holds her hand up in the uncertain light, and where the golden glow catches the tang of silver, it seems to erupt in pinprick sparks. She wears an expression that he can't read, something that seems to be trapped between satisfaction and loss.

Quietly, still watching only her hand, she says, "And the other rings? They're all like the this one, and like the one you're wearing."

"Long story."

"One you don't want to tell me." Oddly, it's a statement, not a prelude to a pout.

"Not at the moment."

"But later?"

"If there is a later. If you can forget that I've been acting like such an idiot."

She makes the leap he fears. "This has something to do with Micah, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

She looks at him now, and clouds spring into her eyes, turning their extravagant blue into lead. "You're not who you seem to be, are you?"

"I am," he says quickly. "Except for a few details."

"Amah said you were."

That you were lying. Was that what she meant?

"Emma, I--" I just want you to be safe. I want to protect you.

She drops her hand into her lap and shakes her head, silencing him. "It's beautiful, Ray. That's enough for now. Thank you." The smile that spreads her lips is wide, brilliant, genuine, as though she's chosen to forget that's he's a big, fat liar. "We should eat before the food gets cold. Amah will be expecting me home soon."

She doesn't ask him any more questions. But on the way back to her rooms, she takes his hand and walks close to him, their shoulders touching, and it's enough. Without speaking, she tells him that everything between them is fine.

Chapter Nine

The place is called the Front Office Bar, one of those themed deals, where the waitstaff and bartenders dress like sporting referees and the floor is sectioned off into quadrants to simulate basketball courts, a baseball infield, the fifty yard line of a domed stadium and a goalie's crease. Bright lights, active conversation, the frequent outraged bursts of young men clustered in front of giant vid screens watching relatively live feed sporting events. It's as upscale as a primarily men's club can be on the Garden, catering to the tastes of young, largely unattached but financially prosperous businessmen. Not colonists for New Holyoke, which is important, but gentlemen travelling with contracts in their pockets, deals on their minds, ambition in their bloodstreams.

Poofs, in other words. Guys who can critique the moves of a power forward or shooting guard and mentally compare him to forty other players in a given league to peg his strengths, weaknesses, potential, but couldn't land a three point shot themselves if you gave them a rack of balls, a free afternoon and a running start.

But also the sort of guys who would study the Whiston Corporation in numbing, statistical detail, who would keep their ears to the ground and snuffle out any tidbits of data, family or otherwise, that could be leveraged for profit. In backwards nations, this is called blackmail. On Wall Street and its assorted doppelgangers in human space, it's just called business.

Sitting here at the bar on the second day of Operation Bogeyman, Corporal James Rodriguez, lately of the 15th Marine Frontier Expeditionary Force, C Company, now CIU affiliated covert operative, is growing increasingly disturbed by his perception of the mission guidelines. Or misperception, as the case may be. It has *got* to be a misperception, frankly, because even without having finished his degree at Virginia Tech, he doesn't need help recognizing or analyzing the psychotic nature of what he's been told--though he does completely recognize the military nature with which it is being carried out, which trumps all other concerns in most cases.

But he knows madness when he sees it, even if there's nothing he can do about it.

The curious part is that he's not sure if Commander Marlowe even believes it. Despite what he claims he has experienced, it isn't as though he's necessarily drawing lines between that event and this one. Other people are drawing those lines for him, and that just seems to piss him off. Commander Marlowe seems to be the type of man who is not particularly interested in coloring between the lines.

That's a little more difficult for Rodriguez to understand. He's been inside the lines for his entire life. Parental lines, social lines, lines procedural, martial, racial.

He's experiencing that again, now that he's on the *outside*, not in uniform or graded by the distinct Marine scale where neither officers nor enlisted care about the derivation of your name, your social stratum of origin. Just about competency and effectiveness. The men around him look him over and assume he's competent, or he wouldn't be here, on *Paraclete* with them. He'd be back in some dank office shuffling papers between bins of varying degrees of irrelevance. But these poofs, and the people like them, are snap-quick to pin him down to race by his looks, to socio-economic stratum by his clothes and carriage, education by demeanor and language. They recognize one of their own rapidly, but eat everyone else alive.

It's a completely different world.

And this kills him. This evening, an hour ago, a woman walked up to him where he was sitting at the bar, maybe mid-fifties, dark, monied from the look of her sculpted features and the playful, casual elegance of her attire. That she was here suggested something about her tastes in entertainment, though Rodriguez suspected that had very little to do with batting averages and goals scored against.

He was, at the time, trying to wiggle his way into a conversation with a tangle of young men ostensibly watching a soccer match, but mostly just drinking beer and complaining about the fact that they had no women (which might have had something to do with the volume of their drinking, but it wasn't something he was going to point out to them). Rodriguez was not drinking, though he knew he probably should be. Why sit in a bar if you're not going to drink? Certainly, there was a beer in front of him, but it had been there for an hour, mostly untouched, and that was the type of thing bartenders and waitresses tended to notice after awhile. He didn't know the terrain well enough to tell if this was the sort of place where the bartenders were friendly with the customers, or if the customers were regulars and/or suspicious of outsiders behaving oddly. And he is somewhat hamstrung by the simple fact that he hasn't been seen here over the six months of the voyage, a johnny-come-lately who begs the obvious questions about where exactly it is that he came from.

But aside, the woman approached him. Not unattractive, though she was starting to wear her age in the bags beneath her eyes. She was exposing enough raw and surgically enhanced cleavage to suggest a spelunking expedition was in order. Right in front of him she came, from all the way across the room, from the baseball diamond, and began to rattle at him in a tormented, textbook Mexicali-Span variant like the ones they teach in beginner university classes.

Rodriguez blinked at her, uncomprehending. "Excuse me?"

Though he tried to be polite, she flushed, a bit exasperated, and launched into it again. He stopped her before she could get too far, make either a fool or a spectacle of herself. He picked out the word for *sex*, though she used an insensibly guttural form of it, and *suite* and that was enough to make her intentions obvious. She was trying to pick him up, smiling all the time, like this was an advanced form of flattery.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he informed her. "I really can't understand what you're saying."

She seemed to wilt at first, but came back at him bravely, with just a tint of self-deprecation. Still very game, and pleased by his clear understanding of standard American. "My pronunciation is that bad, then? I suppose lessons will only take one so far. It's always better to become *immersed* in the culture."

"I don't know. I'm not sure what language it was you were trying to speak."

That, apparently, was a stunner. "But it was Mexicali!"

"Huh. News to me. I don't speak Mexicali."

"But..." And she tried, honestly tried, to stop herself before it popped out, before she looked like an idiot.

He used to get that quite a bit, back when he was fresh to EED, away from Terran space, where outside the Spanish Enclave colonies, hispanics were curiosities, cultural artifacts for people who had left Terra in their youth, or knew all they did about her from books and vids and computer software. Enamored by Aztecs was what they were.

Except, he's not really even hispanic, either, not in the classical, racial, cultural sense. His great-great-grandfather was hispanic, actually lived in a Mexicali *barrio*. But his great-great-grandmother was Swiss-Austrian. They both had spoken pure, unadulterated American from birth. Worked in American cities, held American jobs, and after the Annexation Act, paid American taxes in return for American citizenship. All Rodriguez had left of his "heritage" was a touch of the looks (which was good) and the name (which was frequently a liability). He was about as close to being Aztec as he was to being authentically hispanic.

Him, he grew up in the suburbs outside Baton Rouge where his father was a chipset design engineer, then moved to Chicago when he was twelve, which excoriated anything like an accent he might have developed.

He prefers burgers to tortilla anything. He likes pale, bookish girls with long, light colored hair. Girls cut from his mother's mold, maybe not so surprisingly.

The assumptions that people make used to annoy him; now he merely finds them amusing mostly, or at times like this, slightly embarrassing.

But that's done with now. The woman made an effort to chat him up for a few more minutes afterward, but politely and didn't proposition again before she slunk back to her corner and eventually out of the bar all together. This is another thing that he has found curiously loopy about *Paraclete* and its denizens. There is so much casual and consensual mating going on, it borders on the outrageous. You would think people had nothing else to do.

Now Rodriguez is a Marine. He did his six month stint in New Mes straight out of basic, just like every other Marine in the last decade, before he traded up to starships. He knows something about cheap, easy sex, because there isn't a military entrenchment anywhere in the world that doesn't accumulate an entourage of brothels and whores and available local women willing to trade sex for money. It's part of the environment, and a sensical one at that. Young men in combat conditions like easy, available sex--require it, in fact. It is very Freudian.

And because Marines like to fuck so much, the EED pursues an aggressive shipboard policy of keeping the Marine contingent as isolated from the paying passengers as possible. The average upper class lady traveling by starship should not be subjected to the typical Marine version of foreplay, i.e. thumbing through your wallet for small denomination bills. It is perceived as a public relations disaster waiting to happen.

This is what he has been told, at least, in the barracks.

It was obviously a big lie.

Because what he has seen in his two days of liberty is that the passengers of *Paraclete* are sexual freaks. The whole point of the Garden seems to be finding strangers to bump pelvic zones with. You can't stroll into a public washroom without finding some young gentlemen sticking it to a pretty girl in a party dress on the sink counter. Attractions are instant, obvious, acted upon with hardly a word spoken. Everything is casual; everything is libido. Even asking a woman the time of day is roughly equivalent to granting permission for a vigorous fondling.

From a sociological perspective, Rodriguez finds this interesting. Investigatively, however, it presents difficulties he had not expected, though he and Sergeant Kilgore had taken great amusement in discussing the possibilities. It is an odd world in which a Marine finds himself to be the social prude.

So that's what he's doing here, trying to solve tactical problems by retreating to a safe position from which can gather intelligence without having to divert a significant amount of his resources to fending off sexual advances. It constitutes something of an early mission failure, he must admit.

By late evening, he's watched soccer, now baseball, groaned in all the right places, cheered for the right teams and the right players. He has exchanged names with most of the guys immediately around the bar, and finagled his way into buying a good share of the rounds. He took two losing bets on relief pitcher substitutions from the blond accounting exec Aaron Stevenson just to ingratiate himself with the group, then won three more on late inning strategy wagers to demonstrate his knowledge level and win back some of their respect. The current game is early in the third inning, but looks to be a pitching duel, so interest has begun to wane as the chemical lubrication level waxed.

"So what is it you do exactly, Jimmy?" The question comes from Jess Shue, a dark haired statistical savant

seated on the stool next to him. Rodriguez has already been warned not to take any wagers offered to him by Mr. Shue.

"Contract negotiation for Nortical-Sheaf," he says. It was his father's company.

"They do proprietary chipsets, right?"

"Yes."

Shue arches an eyebrow. "And you've got a contract on New Holyoke? I didn't think they had the infrastructure in place to start thinking about moving to alternate sets. They're still running old 66 Cray clones at the mining op."

Rodriguez shrugs, trying to hide the fact that he's scrambling. "It's a private venture, not mining, still in the startup phase."

"Playing it close the vest, aren't you?" Shue says, winking.

"The client prefers it that way until they're ready to go public."

"Still, that's high end merchandise."

Rodriguez can almost see him mentally filing this factoid away for later analysis.

"There's only a handful of companies I can think of who would be willing to take that kind of financial risk this far out on the fringe," he continues. "And all of them are independent subsidiaries of the big W."

Whiston Corp., he means. "That could be."

"You brought samples?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't show them to you. The design specs are extremely confidential, at the request of the client."

Shue raises his hands between them, an *I'm not trying to pry* gesture. "Hey, that's cool. Fair enough. Just sort of a hobby of mine."

Of course, digging up clandestine negotiation details is a hobby they all seem to have in common. Corporate espionage is the currency of the young up-and-comer.

But Shue goes on, lowering his voice. "I just find it interesting that the big W is moving in on territory it already has a proprietary interest in, if you know what I mean. The Board has been pretty aggressive, it seems to me, in dealing with the New H branch as it is, at least if you pay attention to the types of signs guys like us look at. Could be a strong move to entice Whelemat back into the fold, especially since they didn't have to use their own capital investments for the grunt work."

"Yes," Rodriguez agrees, though he has no idea what it means.

"Really, I tell you, I'd be pissed off if I was Fred Whiston. The Board has effectively disenfranchised the root of the family from any actual corporate activity, and that's mostly their own fault. Not Fred's, of course, but his grandfather, old Fram. What he thought he was going to accomplish way out here is beyond me. But to have the W swooping back in and luring Townshend Wright into a shipping deal that makes them putative

partners? That has got to smart. But it figures, right? It was just a matter of time before the Board stopped playing Terran steward and just took over all the related assets. It's still shocking, though, how quickly they're accelerating things now that they perceive weakness in the family determination."

"Weakness, indeed."

"But it's all about the money, right? With the dividends the Whistons are pulling in, why would they care?"

"Pride," Rodriguez offers, suddenly thoughtful.

"Yeah. There is that."

"On the other hand, given the family's current troubles," Rodriguez points out, "one would expect them to appreciate the lack of public focus."

Shue nods. "Sure. The earnings statement last week was disappointing, and some of their investors are going to take a big messy bath, but that's mostly academic. It's just a bump in the road."

Rodriguez shakes his head, smiling. These guys have a neurotically narrow focus. "Not that. Of course it won't slow them down. I'm talking about this potential legal mess with the Trust. The murder of the boy."

But Shue gives him a sort of blank look. "The Trust?"

"Yes. The boy that was murdered the other night. That's got to have some effect on consumer confidence, even if it's not really related to Corporation business."

"What? You mean on New H? Nobody on Terra cares what happens out here." He speaks slowly, almost mumbling, like he's trying to sort out the point of this tangent. "I guess it could be a bombshell for the tabloids."

"No, I mean here. On the ship."

Just more blankness. Shue has no idea what he's talking about. "You must have gotten some bad information, Jimmy. That would cause a pretty big buzz, especially with the Whistons aboard. Security would be turning the ship inside out, right?" He lets it go with a small laugh, like he's just realized Rodriguez was putting him on. "Seriously, I wouldn't go spreading that around if I were you, not this close to the H. Whiston might be a big pussy with his head up his ass, but the Corp Stewards aren't. They pay very close attention to who is saying what, especially info that could be a PR deal breaker. You could really wreck yourself. They're really sensitive about stability issues way out here as it is. And right now, with the Lilaikens kicking up all kinds of trouble? I don't even want to speculate about the ways they'd screw with you. That's just too scary."

The game intervenes for several moments as the New York pitcher plants a fastball over the fat part of the plate and gives up a two run bomb. There are shouts from the Yankee haters, which seems to be just about everyone paying attention.

But at mid-inning, Shue turns back to him. "Look, Jimmy, I can see you haven't been to New Holyoke before, so I imagine you're a little nervous. You're still trying to make your big score--I understand that. It wasn't too long ago that I was there myself. But you've got to strain the rumors you pick up, and you've got to verify the nuggets of truth before you pass them along, even in idle conversation." He's suddenly very serious, a big brother handing down advice from the mountain of experience. "New Holyoke is frontier territory. It's rule by corporate fiat where the Whistons in one form or another pay the cops, the judges, the courts. Everybody in power owes their livelihood to Whelemat, the Trust or the family itself, and they're going to zealously defend

the folks who sponsor them, get it? You've got to watch your back on the frontier, because people who don't are liable to find themselves vanished. And the biggest part of watching your back is staying either on the Whistons' good side, or operating completely below their grid."

Rodriguez nods, tries to look suitably abashed. "I understand."

Shue gives him a good-natured slap on the shoulder. "If it makes you feel any better, I saw Fred Whiston just this morning in Iranoi. Absolutely loaded, absolutely gregarious--the same Fred as always. If there had been something like you describe, do you really think he'd let himself be spotted in public following the same old routine? The Whistons are very sensitive to public perceptions."

"Okay, then."

Shue gives him another convivial wink. "Besides, Frederick is a pansy. Who wants to talk about him? You want to talk intimately about a Whiston scion, my friend, let's talk about Emma. Mercy. Did you get a chance to download the tabloid pics they nabbed of her in the shower? I mean, I know they were digitally touched and cheesy as all hell, but I would pay good money to know who the model behind the headshot was." He laughs. "Man, I tell you, it's probably a good thing for her that the family has been shunted to the side. If she was anything but a frontier celebrity, she wouldn't be able to turn around without bumping into stalkers."

It's better, Rodriguez thinks, that he disengage at this point. Anything else Jess Shue might have to say about Emma Whiston is not something he's going to pass along.

And he says plenty.

"So, of course, I'm like: 'Hello! What kind of silly-gilly do you take me for? Just because *my father* has given me *his* company cred to buy something *decent* to wear on my arrival home, and just because every person knows without a doubt what the Whiston cred signature looks like does not mean that I'm going to let them *gouge* the company and the Whistons like I'm some kind of freeloader. I was *incensed*, let me tell you. Absolutely incensed."

Oy.

This girl just will *not* shut up, Kilgore is thinking. Which on the one hand is not bad, because it occurs to him that he can't remember her name. Mellisa? Marni? Madelaine? No, that was the one yesterday afternoon, in Olduvai George down on Delta. The pretty blonde with big feet and red painted toenails.

This one is a standard brunette with round features, collagen enhanced lips and eyes that are a sort of muddy green hazel, like a cat's. Like a pussy. *What the fuck is her name?* He can't remember. He's been chasing her for too long to let a silly thing like her name stick in his memory.

He's learned a strange thing over the past few days. Much like the Hump Deck, the social circles on the Garden and down here on the more exclusive Zeta Deck, are small. Six thousand passengers, give or take, and most of them are homebodies or parentbodies or high-classbodies or businessbodies. Everybody has their little niche, their little groups they travel in of a few hundred, where folks know one another by name, first or last, or reputation. Gossip is like a wildfire, scorching through synaptic canyons that act as representations of relationships--acquaintance, mutual, sexual, rumored.

He's tracked this one because of a webwork of connections; things he's picked up from other girls, grinning guys, fat-nosed old biddies who sniffled every time she walked into the room. What he has gleaned is this:

she's New Holyoke class, middling twenty-something, not intensely bright, which explains why she's still slogging her way through a 1st Level liberal arts degree back on Strat, from which she's on her way home for a brief visit between terms. Hot as a Fourth of July sparkler and bursting at the seams with energy; and those aren't the only seams she's about to burst--which you can see for yourself from the way she rims out of her blue cocktail dress in every place she's got a curve. And she's got lots of curves. Curves and hills and delectable, delicious valleys in all the right places and all the right proportions.

Oh, and freaking money falls out of her twat. She jingles doubloons when she walks, and jiggles everything else just right the rest of the time. Her father is some sort of third generation Whiston Corp. expatriate bugger, mining engineer or something like that, marooned on New H where there's nothing worth spending his cred for and the bank account just balloons and balloons. What some people call *nouveau riche*, Kilgore suspects, but what folks in his part of the country just call Uppity. Uppity or Going Somewhere, and he's never been completely sure there's a difference.

So dad's a mining engineer, the story goes. If that's true, mom must be some kind of Cro-Magnon moron, because daughter is definitely not firing on all cylinders. Which is possibly due to genetics, but more likely because she carries a complete illicit pharmacy of Rage and Pixie Dust and Boppers and a bee-zillion other illegal substances strapped in her belt. He's got a contact buzz just from sucking in the air around her.

Which he hopes to God is also the reason she won't fucking shut up, because at least if it's drug induced happy-yappity, at least he can expect her to crash some time in the near future. And then: blessed silence. He hopes.

Most important, though, is the fact that she claims to have had contact with the Whistons, both on New H and with Miss Whiston in school on Strat. To listen to her, they (meaning she and Miss Whiston) have been tight since pre-school, hung out together at university like a pair of giggling gadabouts, did everything but the lesbo nasty while Miss Whiston had slipped free of the brother's leash (and maybe a little of that, too, though Kilgore suspects that's more chicky fantasy than anything else).

Truth is, if he is any judge of bullshit at all, anything she knows about the Whistons, is only from reading gossip sheets and tabloids and more than likely just plain making stuff up that suits her. She's all gloss, all stupid cow beneath a glittering veneer (though once again, it most certainly is not a veneer he objects strenuously to). Frankly, he can't imagine the Miss Whiston he has encountered spending more than a few seconds on a gadfly like...

Jocelyn? Jenna? Jada?

But he's growing tired of her, nuclear fusion hot or not. It's late, going on 3:00 a.m. Jedira Dance, the club they've settled in after several hours of barstool hopping all across Zeta--because what's-her-name has to be *seen*--is sending out all the subtle hints of a jackhammer to the skull that they're getting ready to close for the night. The holo show dance floor is dark, mopped, WET FLOOR signs posted. The scented synth-smoke machine has been rolled into a closet. The cute little waitress with the bouncing boobs and impressive ass has been back and forth a dozen times, stripping away their empties until only bare napkins with damp condensation rings remain. They've even stopped playing any tunes that possess anything even vaguely resembling a beat you could shimmy to. In fact, what is playing sounds like a bunch of dying whales, and is probably laced with sub-hypno messages that are telling them to get out.

Kilgore would very much like to get out. He's wasted pretty much the entire evening to figure all of this out about poseur chick, and now he's stuck with her. He has been taken hostage by the enemy; he is down behind enemy lines. If he doesn't find a way to escape soon, he is bound by ancient codes of honor to gouge out his own eyeballs, rip out his tongue and eventually impale himself on a blunt object.

Oh, and she's drunk. God, she's gloriously drunk--despite the fact that he's had the waiters watering down her whisky sours for the last two hours. First half strength, then quarter strength, then just giving her ice water and telling her she had ordered vodka straight on the rocks. At the last, they were even refusing the tips he offered, just sort of shaking their heads with a *feel for you, man* expression.

And worse, he's gotten exactly nothing. Not just tonight, but all week. From the absolute beginning, nothing! It's like the Whiston clan doesn't exist in anything but the popular imagination, like there's no reality behind the imagination. Because he's been all the way around the block on this one. Guys who might be chummy with Frederick Whiston. Guys who might have a grudge against Frederick Whiston for being a big, wealthy bastard. Girls who might have screwed him. Then it was guys who might have had sex with Miss Whiston (which was no dice at all), or girls who might have had sex with her (which was unlikely, given her vibe, but stranger things had been known in the human consciousness). Now he's down to people who might know her, however obliquely. He's running out of options.

Which means he's running *into* questions. Like what the fuck is he doing, then? Why is he pressing so hard? Sure, Marlowe is all gung-ho and five by, pushing to nail down this dickhead who thinks he can carve up little kids. Hoo-ah, Kilgore's all for that. He's all for playing wastrel, rich-fart, playboy ready to bang three-four-five potential witnesses or informants a day. That's not just a cush job, buddy, that's a career aspiration. But there's this other business, too. This stuff about devils and camel-humper incantations, and that seems to be behind *everything*. It can't just be about catching a kid killer, which is where Kilgore would like to keep it. Where fucking common sense would like to keep it, now that you mention it. Seriously, Ray seems a straight-up guy, but how are you supposed to believe a thing like that? And if you can't believe it, what does that mean?

Maybe that Marlowe's a straight-up guy who happens to be a little nutcake. Nothing wrong with that, is there?

But if you go that direction, if you assume he's a raging loony-hatch candidate and that's the end of it...why is he pushing so hard? "He" being Kilgore, who should know better, who wears this creepy little dimestore ring despite the idiocy.

And in the meantime, what's-her-name drones on. "And after I had all of that straightened out, of course, and the manager was practically on his knees to apologize to me, I simply *had* to show him that there were no hard feelings, even though I really have run out space in my closets for *more* dresses. I swear, I'm going to have to take a private shuttle just for my *things*! And then my father will absolutely kill me, because it's so *ostentatious*, you know, especially with so many of the actual miners hardly scraping by."

This threatens to send her off on yet another social consciousness tract (which is her *duty* as one of the *privileged* classes and because of her *abiding loyalty* to Emma Whiston and the *fine* example she sets by spending so much of her time with the orphans). Which are all things Kilgore is supposed to understand and care about inherently because it's obvious from the amount of ship's cred he's thrown about not just tonight, but over the last week, that he fits her profile of the "privileged classes".

He gives her a "Hey. Yeah. Believe me, I understand. Really" to cut her off, and which does actually (miraculously) slow her down just enough for him to look at his watch in a way that isn't completely rude. "You know, it's getting late. I should probably--"

She rolls her eyes. "Oh! It's *so* late. I know exactly what you mean. I don't even know *how* I keep my eyes open sometimes."

"Well," Kilgore says. "Then, okay."

He levers himself up from his chair, debating the etiquette of leaving her here alone, visibly wasted as she is.

Maybe if he offered the waitstaff enough cred, they'd see her back to her berth.

But she pops up like a jack-in-the box, straining the sequined fabric of her bodice in ways its structural engineers probably did not plan on or account for in their designs. "Of course, we'll finish this at *my place*, before they absolutely throw us out. I mean, I'd never be able to show my face here again, would I?"

Oy.

And so they walk out, arm in arm, and she chatters all the way around the concourse. Kilgore plots an escape that won't damage his cover, but keeps running headlong into the critical absence of chloroform in his arsenal to carry off anything convincing.

They walk all the way to the opposite side of the ship, to the compartments wedged against the outer hull in a sleepy sort of cul-de-sac. She punches her security key into the door lock and drags him inside.

Her room is a standard single, somewhere between modest and upscale, with a living area large enough for a couch, an end table and a vid screen; an abbreviated galley area like the one in Kilgore's room, though he assumes this one works as advertised. He makes sure she gets inside safely, goes so far as to peek into the public area to make sure they haven't accidentally smuggled in a murderer or rapist under cover of her verbal fusillade, then turns to go. Except the door has closed behind him and the kako-daimon responding to the motion sensor cue just gives him a sort of apologetic, doomed shake of the head.

She's saying, "So my father was like 'Tari--'"

Heh. Kilgore makes a mental note.

"--you've *got* to study something of social *value*. You've got to *contribute* something to the colony'. And, of course, I'm *trying* to explain to him that *fashion* is completely valuable to a colony. That it's all about *public perception*. I mean, really, do we want the other systems to think of us as total and complete *bumpkins*? But he just isn't hearing it." Two snaps, a wiggle, and she leaves her dress in the middle of the floor. Even for Kilgore, this is objectively impressive, since he had more or less decided that clothing that tight had been surgically grafted onto her. She swings back to him, so she won't have to talk back over her shoulder, a pleasant ripple of pink curves. "I mean, it isn't like we need *another* engineer. The entire planet is practically sinking in orbit with them."

What? He is, after all, a man. What else is he going to do with a naked chick? Walk away from it? Pfft.

There are several confusing minutes which follow, in which she probably says several very illuminating and self-revelatory things he doesn't catch very clearly because she's on the couch and his head is wedged between her thighs. After that, she doesn't say anything for ten or fifteen complete minutes while she undresses him and displays more than a vigorous expertise in other oral skill areas.

But by the time he carries her back to the bedroom and tumbles with her into bed, she's used up her daily allotment of silence.

She tells him about her gymnastic training, then demonstrates.

She rattles on about her vocal training, and impresses him with a few high notes, though they're mostly muffled by the pillow.

There's a bit later on about her adolescent horrors with the size and shape of her ass, but he doesn't really want to go there.

Finally, he's exhausted, insensate, scrubbed raw from his knees to his nipples and relegated to the bottom. She's burned most of her energy away and is content to rock gently back and forth on top of him, eyes closed, dark hair tangled, cheeks flushed. And she is most determined to keep him on the jagged, pulsating edge between orgasmic tension and release.

He's not thinking very straight, not thinking about anything at all, really, except pressure and wetness and white, glaring glee.

And that he'd really like it if she'd just *shut up* for five measly seconds. That's all it would take.

Now slow, languid, she says, "All of our fathers tried to be like him, Mr. Whiston. Not Frederick, you understand, but the old man. I never met him, of course, because he passed away before I was born. I was born the same year as Emma. Mr. Whiston cast a huge shadow across the entire planet, but especially Blackheath Grange. My father said he was such an immense man, not in stature, mind you, but in personality. He built much of the city, drew it up from his own designs. Not a tavern or a hotel or even a home could be built unless the plans were submitted to him first. He controlled everything.

"And our fathers depended so much on his goodwill for their jobs, they wanted to emulate him, which meant they wanted their daughters to emulate Emma. They wanted us to *be* Emma."

She digs her pelvis deep into his, and Kilgore has to grip the sheets in his fists and curl his toes until they crackle to keep her from ending it all right there.

"And their sons to be like Frederick," he groans.

She stops sharply. Kilgore wrestles his eyelids open and looks at her, backlit in the soft glow of the room's lamps. Her eyes have gone distant, hard, thoughtful.

"What?" he says, and rolls back and forth beneath her to prod her on.

"No one wanted a son like Frederick." She takes the hint, settles back into her steady rhythm.

"Freddy seems like a fuck up."

"It isn't that. Frederick is..." Slows again, maddening. "...different. Not completely--not like a Whiston, I guess. There's something *lesser* about him. He's a shameful drunk, you know. Everyone knows that. And when he isn't drunk, he's cruel."

Concentrate. God, the things he endures for the job! "How so? Like mean? Enjoys hurting people?"

She shakes her head, now only marginally occupied with their sex. "Not mean. Mean isn't the word for it. You know, they whisper in the streets that he hurts Emma. Not just bruises and scratches, but *hurts* her. In terrible ways. And there's nothing she can do to stop him. Mother says that's probably why she ran off to Stratiskaya Daransk. To get away from him and the things he made her do."

Kilgore swallows thickly, painfully. The start and stop and start again feels like a rusty nail driven into the end of his penis. "But if he could do things...things to his own sister, I mean. Don't people worry about the children? The orphans they bring in under the Trust?"

She stares at him, blank as a vid screen tuned to an empty channel. "Why would you say something like that?"

Like kickstarting an engine, like the idea of it excites her, she's at it again, grinding into him, sucking him all

the way inside herself.

Ugh.

"You've heard about the boy," he mutters, unevenly.

"A couple of days ago. Can you believe they're doing nothing about it?"

Actually, he can't believe someone actually *knows* about it. For a week, he's chatted up socialites and bartenders and undersexed old women who would have to be told, would simply stare, assume he was putting them on, making some sort of crude joke. Most of them walked away then, angry that he would suggest such a thing, assuming that he had some grudge against the Whiston clan or against the crew of the ship or both.

Unthinkable. Impossible. Those were the types of things he heard.

But this one...this one had at least heard. Heard lots of things, apparently. Frederick and Emma? Oy. Best if he didn't go dropping that rumor into circulation in front of the commander. Marlowe would tear his balls off and feed them to the rat just for thinking such a thing (and assuming Tari left anything of his balls in the first place, once she was done).

"Still, if he can do that to his own sister, right? Who's to say what he could do to some kid not even related to him?"

She doesn't answer. Probably doesn't even hear him. She's growling like an animal, thrashing, squeezing her breasts.

"Right?"

Her orgasm is sudden, explosive, strangling. He holds off for a time measured in picoseconds, then erupts into her, a column of burning release or relief, he can't tell.

And when they're done, and she's stopped caterwauling and panting, she giggles, then winks her dark eyes at him and flashes that silly little smile.

"Frederick could *never* do anything like that. He's cruel, but he's weak. He's a cowardly and weak, pathetic man. I knew that the moment I started fucking him. Never again, I'll say that much."

Kilgore wants to scream. He can feel it building in his chest, but he stifles it, because it would probably just excite her again.

But she stretches across his chest, not bothering to separate herself from him, buries her face in the corner between his neck and shoulder. She whispers into his ear, softly, playfully. "Some people say he only puts his hands on Emma because she *lets* him. That maybe she wants him to."

And that, that's something else he's more than likely going to keep out of the investigation's files.

After a while, she sleeps. He disentangles himself, still thoroughly, outrageously disgusted despite himself, and though he wants to just rush away, to escape before she can wake, he slips into her bathroom and avails himself of her shower. He has to scrub all those shared-Freddies and potential shared-Freddies away.

When he's done and dressed again, he eases her beneath the covers, smooths her hair into place and leaves her.

Just because he's working doesn't mean he has to be a complete asshole.

But all the same, tomorrow his goal is the shy, silent type.

It hasn't been this way in a long time. A long, long time, not since that first time and that first girl, Julie Lynn Gentry, another small and supple blond who made him feel clumsy and dense, who almost made him fall over every time he said something and she laughed, who just standing next to him sucked the breath right out of his body. That was what, freshman year, sophomore year? Then it was over by the end of April, two weeks to the day after she'd let him touch her breast in the backseat of his father's car. Then she was with Chad Wertzler, and every time he heard her laugh in the halls at school, he knew she was laughing at him--and that was how he learned the big guy lesson, the essential guy lesson, the bit about never letting them get deeper beneath your skin than you've gotten under theirs.

Maybe it's *never* been like this. Because if it was, and he had allowed himself to forget it, what kind of idiot does that make him?

So he's riding in the lift, just holding Emma's hand, grinning and feeling like his head is about two meters thick, being silly. He's standing there with his back against the wall for balance against the tug of plunge and gravity; she's got her hand in his, and they're doing that annoying little thing where you swing your arms back and forth. One of those stupid *couple* things that makes outside observers want to vomit. And he's not even thinking about it. Just doing it, and marveling at the fact that he's doing it without feeling like a big chump. Though maybe that's just because they're alone in the elevator.

And what was it that they had done this evening to make him so jolly-giddy-stupid? Nothing.

None of his organic parts had been used to poke any of her organic parts, which was supposed to be the definition of inter-gender amusement. They had gone for an early dinner. He had told her about his supposed job, about Ziggy riding his ass for his assorted screw-ups while she pretended she was moderately interested. Except he had to assume she was just pretending, because it had looked like she actually cared about it. Nodding in the right places, giggling where appropriate, flashing those hypnotic, sparkling eyes. Then a stroll up to the obs deck to count stars and galactic clusters. He'd kissed her there, beneath the tail of a passing meteor, because she said it was good luck. He'd never heard of such a thing and thinks she probably made it up on the spot, just so she could stick her tongue in his mouth.

What a giddy, freaking loon he has become. It's embarrassing, frankly.

"Do you want to come in for a while?" Emma says, fluttering eyelashes and demure. "It's still early...unless you have to work, that is."

"My schedule has become a bit more flexible lately. And I'd like to, yes."

"It would make Amah feel more comfortable with you."

"It would?"

"After the last time. Your previous meeting was a little awkward."

Oh. "Sure."

She grins at him, devilish, pleased. "That wasn't what you thought I meant."

"Of course it was. I love your family. Every last one of them."

"You're such a liar."

The lift doors ping, open, and they exit into the corridor. He has no interest in talking to Amah again, to be honest. Doesn't really give a rat's ass about her or Frederick. "I'd actually like to meet some of these kids that occupy so much of your time. You know, assure myself that they actually exist instead of secretly believing that you've got a boyfriend on the side."

"Then it's a good time. They should just be finishing up their evening studies."

"Evening studies'. Quite the drill sergeant you are."

But Emma shakes her head. "Don't drag me into it. Amah designs the schedule for their education, and the tutors she selected to travel with us implement it. I'm just here for moral support, and because it's expected of me to take an interest. But I'm not very good with children."

"I'm sure you're just being modest."

"Not at all, Ray. You'll see."

At the door, she keys in her entry code, stopping the kako-daemon's warble in mid complaint. It's a reasonable excuse to let go of his hand, which is just as well, since Ray had been wondering how to do that without making it look like he was trying not to hold her hand in front of Amah and any other Whiston domestics who might be about. It's another one of those romantic dilemmas that hasn't really changed since Julie Gentry. Age and experience, if they were supposed to collude in providing a solution on the intervening twenty years, are vastly overrated in his opinion.

They wander inside, thorough the foyer, past the urns and delicate plants, into the living area. Ray expects to find Amah here again, so he has his chipper face screwed on. But her rocking chair is empty over in the corner, a half-formed basket on the floor beside it. The room is silent except for the hum of the bulbs in the lamps.

For all of about three seconds, anyway.

A whoop, a slamming of doors and thunder of feet. A dozen children squirt from the doorway into the hall, spilling into the room like the forward advance of a scrambling vanguard of army ants. Arms raised, elbows and knees flailing, howling with delight.

Someone shouts: "Captain Shadow!"

"Woot!"

Young voices, delicious in their excitement, three-o'clock voices.

"Hooray for Shadow!"

They pile into the staid leather chairs, sprawl across sofas; kids from four to twelve, swaddled in pink and blue pajamas, the smaller ones with stuffed animals, older ones maybe with desk compads or gaming units. One of the younger boys springs to the wall, punches the vid feed and power buttons on the display. An older girl, annoyed, follows up, plugs in the channel commands.

--he's Captain Shadow! Arch enemy of Carok, chief of the Pirates of Sahlura Gaal, sworn defender of the fledgling imperial outpost Zod City, Captain Shadow leads the fight for Justice, Equality, Right against the forces of evil!

Emma leans close to Ray, whispers. "They get an hour of liberty before bedtime. Most of the time, they watch vids."

"I love Captain Shadow."

She gives him an impenetrable look, blinking slowly.

"Run pirates, run pirates, run pirates, hey!" He sings along with the theme music, grinning. He and Little B used to do this every day after school. "Run Carok, fast as you may! But Shadow's gonna get you anyway!"

Emma says, "Oh my god."

"What? Everybody knows Captain Shadow."

It isn't just Emma staring at him. A dozen heads turn his direction, a dozen sets of wide eyes. Ray can't tell if he's just amazed them with his video trivia aplomb or his weird old guy stupidity. The kid nearest to him, probably seven or eight, dark hair and pale, sickly complexion, peers up at him through lidded eyes.

"You like Captain Shadow?"

"Duh," Ray shoots back. "Which one is this?"

"The one where Carok tries to blow up the colony's shield generator by sneaking up through the caves."

Ray makes a sour face, rolls his eyes. "Ugh. After Shadow added Godara Jengo to the crew? I hate him. He's such a loser, and he's not very funny."

A dozen synchronized collections of breath. They know exactly what he's talking about. Jengo appeared in the third or fourth season, after some network suit decided Shadow needed a humorous sidekick to kick up the market share.

"What's your name?" the boy asks.

"Ray."

The kid holds out his hand, a solemnly adult gesture. Ray shakes with him. "My name's John Robert. John Robert Rose. Do you want to watch with us?"

Ray glances at Emma, rolls his shoulders. It isn't exactly what he was expecting, but he can think of worse ways to pass an hour. "It's Captain Shadow."

"You can sit by me," John Robert says, scooting across the couch to make space. "You can watch too, Miss Emma, if you want. You might like Captain Shadow. He's smart, and he likes Princess Shemi, but he only kisses on her sometimes. But not in this one, I hope."

"Kissing is gross," another boy pops in. "Why would he want to kiss her so much?"

"I think kissing is dreamy." This from a strawberry haired girl curled up on the floor with a doll and a plush

bear. "I like the kissing parts."

John Robert rolls his eyes. "Adriana, you don't even know what 'dreamy' means."

"I do so, John Robert."

"Do not."

"Yeah-huh."

"He only kisses her 'cause her dad would have him put in prison if he blasted her." A different boy this time, looking very thoughtful about his contribution to the discussion.

But John Robert shakes his head. "Why would he care about that? He knows how to escape from the prison. Remember when Carok made that clone of King Tayne and kidnapped him? The clone put Shadow in the prison and he was only there for about five minutes before he escaped."

It goes on. On and on, for almost fifteen minutes while the episode they had intended to watch clamors on in the background, unnoticed. Ray pitches in where he can get a word, not certain whether he's inciting them or settling some of the more finely nuanced points of contention. He attempts to argue the pro-kissing position, but it's a difficult sell with this audience. The consensus opinion seems to be that most soldiers would rather blast girls than kiss them. He's on the verge of offering some intimate anecdotal evidence to the contrary, but Emma gives him a sharp jab to the ribs with her elbow before he can get properly started.

It would probably go on for several more minutes with the youngsters getting increasingly agitated and red-faced, finger pointing and pouting, while the older ones moved to the corners of the room and plugged away at their games and compads, but the tutors finally intervene, sweep in to hush them. The ultimate threat is issued: hold your voices down or there will be no more Captain Shadow for the rest of the week. The argument ends like they've lopped the head of it off with an axe, though a clandestine war of hand gestures and silent raspberries ensues in the aftermath.

Ray and Emma drift toward the hall, leaving the pair of brooding domestics who had jumped in to clean up the near-riot scene.

"You were inciting them," Emma says once they're in the corridor. "And enjoying yourself doing it."

"Well, if we're tossing around accusations, you were supposed to back me up. I was dying out there. I mean, they were completely destroying me."

"And you got them in trouble."

"Come on, we were just messing around. Part of messing around is getting in trouble. That's why it's so fun--it's dangerous."

"I don't think they knew what to make of you."

"Sure they did. They thought I was a dumbass. But that's okay; adults aren't interesting unless we're dumbasses around kids. They like to see us acting goofy every once in a while. It's the only way they can believe that growing up isn't all about being bored and going to work and acting so serious all the time."

They enter the doorway at the end of the hall, what was probably a fancy dining room on the last voyage, but with the addition of desks and terminals, a digital instruction board on the wall, has become classroom space.

There are pictures on the wall, family drawings in garish landscapes, like the ones you see held by magnets to refrigerator doors all over human space. These are lined up youngest artist to oldest, look like some odd chart of evolutionary development.

One of the tutors is still here, straightening up, shutting down terminals for the night. Emma introduces her, gives her a name Ray doesn't bother to remember, though he manages to be polite enough. He's looking at the books stacked on the desks. Sybrian's *Quantum Mechanics*. Chau-Liu's text on nanomech theory. The twelve hundred page chunk of *Garver Geological and Eco-Tech Design*. Heavy math, heavy science, subjects Ray tried mightily to avoid when he was in college, though not with much success.

Amazing. Becker was not kidding when he said these kids were bright.

But they liked Captain Shadow, so they couldn't be too freakish--though he may very well have overassessed the level of esteem in which they held him. They probably just thought he was an idiot.

"Yes, they are precocious, Mr. Marlowe."

Amah stands in the doorway, leaning on the lintel, tattooed and hideous. She's not any easier to look at the second time around. "I didn't mean to get them excited right before bed."

"Precocious children need very little excuse to excite themselves in my experience, but it wasn't poorly attempted, Mr. Marlowe. Merely a poor execution. You haven't spent much time around children I take it."

"Just my brother, ma'am." Probably not the best source of precedent.

"Your brother must be longsuffering."

"Longsuffering or dimwitted. I was never certain which."

She ventures into the room, picking her way around the rows of desks until she's standing nearer to them. She's taller than he expected, almost as tall as he is. Her bulk is not fat, her body not neglected, but wide and sinewy, strong.

Amah frowns at him. "I regret the tone of our last meeting. Our first meeting, perhaps I should say. I was not as gracious as perhaps I should have been with you."

"I gave you plenty of reasons to be suspicious. Don't worry about it."

"Good. Let us move forward then. Perhaps you will have some time once we return home. Emma would like to show you the city, I'm sure, and some true Whiston hospitality would do much to erase the harm."

"I'd like that."

"Emma has decided to show you our facilities, I see. You're going to take away a bad impression of us, I fear. Coop them up, drill them with books and tests."

"I'm a little surprised by the curriculum. It's quite advanced."

"Some of our children are quite advanced. Others lag significantly behind the educational level they should have attained. Not all situations are ideal, as you can imagine, but all of the children in the Trust have great potential. We look for that potential and help them develop it. Perhaps it is not the ideal of mother, father, siblings, but it is better in many cases than the lives we cull them from. But we attempt to give them the

facsimile of family as we go along."

Ray feels a flush of embarrassment. "I didn't intend to sound critical."

"But you wondered about their emotional well-being, these orphans on their way to a strange land amongst strange people."

"Sure. I mean, kids are resilient, but losing your parents is a pretty big blow to try to bounce back from."

Amah nods. "For some. Others have been without parents, comforts, love for several years. Those cases are more difficult, and it takes longer for the colony to embrace them--or for them to embrace the colony."

"But having a solid set of useful skills helps, is that it?"

"There is much that they need to know to assimilate well, to avoid social blunders, to learn how to contribute to a society that is, in many cases, radically different than the one they have left behind. We have only a short time to introduce them to the type of lives they will lead on New Holyoke and the types of things they will need to know to flourish there.

"Of course, we have better facilities and a large staff in Blackheath Grange to continue this process, but then they are in the world, of it, immersed in it. We do not want them to feel lost and alone in this new place. So we teach them, and the result is that they become attractive members of the colony. They have the skills and education that the colony needs. In return, they receive love, friendship, support, an extended family as a foundation upon which they can build a life of sound purpose. It is good for both sides, don't you agree?"

He doesn't actually know if he agrees in principle, or if it's just the best of a poor lot of options, but he says he understands and exchanges what he assumes are more or less appropriate pleasantries. This is much better than having her cackle after him for threatening the tranquility and security of the Whiston domestic space.

He still doesn't think she likes him very much, but they seem to have moved from a state of antagonism to one of toleration. It's one he can live with. People have been tolerating him his entire life.

After a few minutes, Amah says, "I hope you have found your visit instructive, Mr. Marlowe, but I must ask that you allow us to end it now. It's getting late."

"Right, bedtime. I understand."

"You will show him out, Emma?"

"Yes, Amah."

Having been dismissed, they duck out into the hall, where they pass the children groaning their way off to bed, herded by tutors. John Robert and two or three of the others wave at Ray, wish him goodnight. None of them speak to Emma.

At the door, he says, "You weren't kidding, were you? About the kids."

"I told you. I never know what to do with them. And I think they're afraid of me."

"Or you're afraid of them."

"Did you know that the younger ones, their noses run all the time."

"It's a good thing you're cute when you panic, otherwise they would more than likely eat you alive. They're barbarians."

He's trying to make her laugh, but she isn't very interested. She is quite serious about her lack of domestic skill.

"I'm just teasing you," he says. "As long as you can cook, I don't care what you think about children."

"I can't cook, Ray."

"Yikes. It's a good thing you're independently wealthy, then. You'd have a hard time finding a husband with that resume." He winks; she smiles. She's more fun to play with than a bunch of uber-kids anyway, even if she doesn't like Captain Shadow. "Maybe you can run the mining operation and Frederick can run the Trust. That way each of you get a piece of the family business."

It's out of his mouth before he can even think about it, fishing. He almost winces, ducks his head.

"I don't think that would be a good idea. Children don't like my brother very much either. I certainly didn't like him when we were children."

"Really?"

"Come on, Ray, have you not been around him?"

As fishing goes, this is what is called slipping bait. But he can't just leave it there. "So kids don't like him because he's not a happy drunk. Why didn't you like him?"

Emma shakes her head, looks away. "I don't want to talk about this."

And he wants to stop there, should stop, but his mind fills with an image: Frederick grabbing Emma by the arm, his knuckles white. Not just bending her to his will, but intentionally causing her pain. Delighting in causing her pain. *What did he do to you?*

"He was hurting you even then, wasn't he?"

"That's just the way he is. He's cruel, mean. Frederick is weak, and he knows it. He takes it out on others."

"Emma," Ray says, quiet and firm. "Do you believe he would hurt the Trust children? Do you think he's really capable of that?"

She barks, like a laugh, but not really. Disgusted. "He's capable of anything. Especially if it's cruel."

Okay, that's clear enough. All Ray has left is to close the circle, ask the obvious question, but there's no way he can do it without sounding like an investigator, like a cop greedy for answers.

Did he kill Micah? Would he do such a thing?

But he can't ask, not Emma, not when he's already treated her so badly with lies. She deserves better from him than to have her past dredged for evidence.

So he doesn't. He'll get what he needs without making her culpable.

"Tomorrow? Lunch?" he asks.

"Dinner. Goodnight."

He brings up the data again. Digital representations of trace tissue samples that he's been over a hundred times, bits of non-Micah DNA and mitochondrial RNA that have been force grown from loose clusters of sticky foreign cells, scoured, scanned, splatted against a stupid number of identification loci along the relevant helical strands. He's taken the profile results and crammed them through every known DNA database from military to medical to criminal, each database assaulted separately, then aggregated, then in every conceivable combination.

He's been all over this data, and there's nothing here. Or maybe there is something here, and he's just not seeing it because he's a hardware guy, he's a techie. He is anything but a forensic scientist who knows what nuances are likely to be missed. And he's precluded by case sensitivity from enlisting an actual forensic scientist because *if* he missed something, and that something happens to be easy for the trained eye to spot (as well as perfectly understandable given the proximity of Frederick Whiston's DNA to the victim's DNA), then the forensic scientist in question is going to get the hit Ray is missing. And when the match comes up as Frederick's or Emma's or anyone else's associated with the Whiston household, it will only be a matter of hours before everyone knows that the EED is investigating the Whistons in the first place. The tabloids don't care that it is just as vital in any investigation to rule suspects out as it is to rule them in--only that celebrities are mentioned in conjunction with the investigation in the first place.

And this kind of attention is exactly that Becker has told him to avoid.

It is complications of this sort that have always made Ray perfectly happy to work for the CIU. In his regular line of work, individuals are not accorded the time to gripe about cases of mistaken identity.

So it would be easy to walk away here, to conclude that Frederick Whiston is a prick and a sod and one generally screwed up son of a bitch who liked to manhandle his sister, who liked to frequently engage in public displays of stupidity, but whose shortcomings did not include a proclivity to murder little kids for pleasure. Jesus knows that Becker would be perfectly happy if he did such a thing.

But it isn't that simple.

Because Emma believes Freddy could do such a thing. Ray sees it in her when she speaks of her brother. Sees it in the way her expression blanches like she's preparing to ward off unseen blows, in the way her eyes skitter away from his, in the way she hates and fears and loathes Frederick all at the same time.

And if she believes, there has to be something to it, right? Despite what Kilgore and Rodriguez have reported that everyone else says about Frederick, and the fact that they can't link him to the crime scene or to the breach of the bay through missing security keys or through any of the dozen other plausible scenarios they've developed to explain the how and the why of it all. He'll look again if for no other reason than that Emma says it might be possible.

And if the truth is anywhere, it must be in the data he and Nomar have collected from the crime scene. He just hasn't had the insight, the angle of perception that will make things sufficiently clear to him. He lacks too many vital experiences to make sense of the things he sees.

That's the optimistic side of him speaking, choosing to believe that the truth is out there.

The more rational side points out that he can toss DNA sequences against extant, supposedly universal profile databases for the rest of his life without coming up with a match because despite the Forum's mandate that a comprehensive DNA database be developed, those mandates mean little on the frontier. Outside Alamai Plantation, the settler and mining habs are raw, the medical facilities bleak and creaking and ancient. Midwives who don't care about DNA profiling deliver more babies than doctors, and even if they did care about something as nebulous as a Forum mandate, they wouldn't have access to the technology to gather their samples, properly thresh them, record the unique identifiers required by law and transmit them to the nearest data clearinghouse. Which means that anyone born outside the Terran solar system is more than likely not going to be in the databases anyway, they are invisible in terms of genetic profile tracking.

And in addition to this, the downright pessimistic side of him itches to lodge the complementary complaint that Emma has already pointed out that she and Frederick were born on Terra, that their father insisted on it, which meant that Freddy's DNA *must* be in at least one database available for a search-match hit. That there was no hit should automatically, definitively preclude him from the suspect pool--with a probability against being something on the order of hundreds of billions against.

Ought. Should. Must. How much clearer could it be?

Except, he's got this niggles inside his skull. A tickle of memory, the only kind of experience which he can bring to bear at all. He remembers this Lilaiken operator on Scherai, in Totansk, running narcs and munitions out of the hybrid tech wastes. A man called Shepherd, big time, cred heavy, geek savvy. They'd been tracking him for months, sluicing from hab to hab, colony to colony, jumping black transports and rogue haulers, assimilating into known secure zones that could only be described as psychotically paranoid with their biometrics.

He went places he should have never been allowed to go. Not with his tags and watches and warrants. A regular prodigy of infiltration and obfuscation was what he was. No genetic record, no DNA id profile, no logged identity at all. No one even knew what he looked like.

But eventually there were bribes and interrogations and an implacably closing circle until there was just Totansk and Shepherd and Ray--and a few thousand innocents (speaking in purely abstract terms) between them. Ray was supposed to find him, nail him, decommission him.

It's hard to kill a man with no profile. Hard to track down such a man when you don't even know what you're looking for. There were weeks, months of surveillance, of mingling, of establishing a legend, and eventually, there was Shepherd. One day blond and blue eyed, Nordic as Odin himself. One day dark, ripped, dread locked and gangly. One day thin and redheaded with breasts as pert and firm and fine as a vid-gen etherporn starlet.

Because it was the tech wastes, after all, where the Terran conventions for mech use got no play, where all the mech hackers fled to play with nano and pico scales and sell their augmentations to the highest bidders. No one knew what Shepherd looked like because he had implanted a dozen score scutter picomech assemblers beneath his dermal layer. He changed his appearance, his form, his gender, his vocal modulation to suit his mood or his circumstance. His features morphed from pre-programmed profile to profile on verbal command, melting and making him like so much wax. Complete structural redesign on the fly; the perfect technological chameleon.

Shepherd got dead because he got careless and assumed that in Totansk, beneath the lurid neon sky, he was among friends. Ray dropped him in an alley behind a rowdy waste tavern and jammed a long and gleaming knife up under his ribs, and when Shepherd expired, his assemblers went berserk from the chemical-electrical cataclysms of dying. His flesh bubbled, melted, steamed. It stretched like taffy and shuddered like gelatin. It erupted like geysers of superheated lava in a lake of molten fire, and when it was over, what remained of the

Lilaiken arms merchant had been a twisted wreckage of bone and tallow and human disaster.

Even in death, Shepherd had preserved the secret of his identity from all but the most dedicated DNA profiling experts.

People spend their entire lives knowing the world and the people about them by sight and gesture, by appearance and visual clue. The face is who you are, what you are, as individual and unique in most ways as the DNA inside your cells. But face or genetic characteristics, they're both forms of establishing identity. Shepherd had done nothing more than acquire a technologically nightmarish mask, the same as the Old West cattle rustlers with bandanas drawn up over their faces.

But this mask was no ten penny, frontier merchantile purchase.

Munitions are good business. Lots of ready cash. You *need* cred like that to afford sophisticated, failsafe pico or nanomech assemblers like the ones Shepherd had used, unless you enjoy the risk of sudden, catastrophic dissolution of your extremities when the assembler control hits a buggy line of design implementation code.

That's why nobody messes with mech-tech on the large scale these days. Too dangerous, too many ethical issues, but mostly just too expensive. When the Terran military complexes gave up on mass production and super-soldiers notions, nanomech augmentation became the exclusive playground of the wealthy, the bored, the iconoclastic.

People like Freddy Whiston.

This is most certainly not something Ray can dig into with the equipment he has on hand. He doesn't know what sort of devices he would need to investigate such a thing, and if he had them, he wouldn't know how to use them.

But there are ways around little details like a complete dearth of knowledge. In the information age, intelligence is not defined by what a man knows so much as where he knows to look for the answers, and what skills he possesses to extract them.

What Ray has is Nomar.

What he lacks is the ready interface tools that will get Nomar to give him the type of information he needs. He requires direct and instantaneous feedback logic. There are easier ways to do this, to get the answers he needs, but all of them necessitate involving more people and more potential security leaks than his mission guidelines strictly allow.

So for the last handful of hours, he's occupied himself with a different sort of project than flat and pointless ogling of DNA profile data. Among his possessions is the battered command net helmet he wore in New Mes. It is tight fitting, aerodynamic, gel-filled on the inside so that it conforms to the shape of his head and clings snugly to his bone structure. Combat engineers liked to assure the Marines who wore them that it would take a direct artillery hit to dislodge it from the wearer--that you were more likely to have your head separated from your neck than your helmet from your head. This was supposed to be reassuring.

Ray's helmet is pitted, scarred by bullet trails, scorched by muzzle flashes. It smells faintly of cordite and anxious sweat. Sitting on the desktop next to his terminal, it looks strange to him, like an alien artifact or a curiosity scavenged from someone else's memory chest. Along the front brim, the desert cloth cover says SGT. MARL in threatening, block letters. The absent OWE is long gone, charred off by a flash bang grenade under circumstances he doesn't even properly remember, except to recall that the Russoturk soldier who threw it surely had meant to toss something else at the time. Combat is full of funny little incidents like that.

He checks the wires from the upload port in the helmet's base to make sure the connection is firm, then slips it on once again. He's been coding the patch between *Paraclete's* internal network and the helmet's military hardware system for an hour. What was supposed to be a simple integration turned out to be a major mindfuck, and he's watched the display crash half a dozen times since he started.

Helmet snug, he grasps the plastic slide on the top and pulls down the tac display screen (theoretically a plastisheen hybrid active matrix display with anti-shatter nanomesh filaments embedded inside, so it was strong enough to take a bullet from nearly point blank range without cracking--Ray has never tested this feature to see if it works as advertised). The Marine command net appears and below it a red band inching from one side of his vision to the other as the software loads. When the bar reaches the right periphery of his vision, it's replaced by a text message informing him that the helmet is interfacing (or attempting to interface) with pre-specified broadcast nodes. In this case, those nodes happen to coincide with the protocol id of the terminal on Ray's desk, which also happens to function as a high bandwidth portal to the primary shipsys network.

Two seconds, three, ten, and he's sure it's going to crash again. There'll be a sort of shudder in the image as the electron gun that sprays pixilated images across the display tries to interpret a haywire signal from a system it doesn't understand, then a flash of red, and finally darkness as the helmet performs a quick shutdown to preserve system integrity.

But it doesn't.

He gets the shudder, but the flash isn't red, it's a snap redraw of the file structure visible on Ray's terminal.

Heh.

The fact that his success fills him with such a rush of pleasure should be disturbing, should remind him exactly how pathetically techno-geek he has become.

But it doesn't.

Instead, he begins barking out commands, selecting files, navigating the hard disk of his terminal and downloading essential systems. Video drivers, imaging software, sound files. He doesn't know what the storage capacity on the helmet's system is, but he's willing to find out by cramming data into it until it explodes. As he goes, he launches applications, testing compatibility. Most of it works. What doesn't work is stuff he can live without.

Later, he plunges through the terminal portal and connects to other ship systems, navigating all the standard structures for which he has clearance. It's all voice command, hacking along at the speed of thought. Mighty kung fu.

But this is all just ramping up for the real project, really. He's configuring his system for optimum interface. With a word and a passcode authentication, he slides through a dead end portal, off the network proper and into an end-user box, what looks like another terminal. Except it isn't a terminal, but a server array. In fact, a server array that he could see with his actual and organically constructed eyes if he took the helmet off.

He's just hacked into the diagnostic unit across the room.

A unit which also happens to be linked via data cable to Nomar's input/output port.

He pauses for several seconds, reviewing his plans for logical failures. It makes his palms sweat. The first thing he does is sort the file structure into server array functions and unit functions. The unit functions on this

machine are a small subset with two master files, one marked simply Input Data and the other 7244 Ident Struct. The first file is massive, pregnant with uploaded data, a storm of binary records. The second is small, manageable, and Ray immediately creates a backup copy.

Then he opens it.

And he launches a utility downloaded from his terminal that he has pragmatically named Dialogue Transform.

Master File 7244 Ident Struct contains nearly a thousand sub-files, each of them given unwieldy kernel structure names that specify data apprehension and processing activities. To anyone who was not a system vet, this would appear unimaginably daunting and arcane. It is the raw face of an AI software conglomerate.

He selects the sub-file which governs verbal command input and copies the Dialogue Transform utility into the Primary Mediator system. It takes him several minutes of additional voice recog coding to mesh his program and the AI's, then several more to move his work from its original location in the base code to another one that makes more sense in the grand tumble of subroutines. Eventually, there are patches generated between dictionary files and dynamic links created between processing and decision systems. Ray codes half a dozen dirty routines that not even he's certain he understands, and in the end, he feels something like a shivering, panic-stricken jellyfish caught in shallow waters as the tide creeps out.

He says, "Hey."

And expects Nomar to do nothing less than burst into a conflagration of flame.

But Nomar doesn't.

Through the helmet, Ray hears the distinct sound of metal on countertop, a rapid skittering of paws. With a jerk, Ray slaps the tactical screen back out of his eyes, up into the helmet's recess. Nomar stands on the counter where Ray left him, sniffing at the air, pawing at atmosphere that he can read like text. Nomar chitters something unintelligible.

Half a second later, the speakers in Ray's helmet click. "Provide location coordinates for interface."

The voice is dead on, part New England nasal, part south Boston truncation, exactly the way he wrote it. But the words are all wrong. He's way too deep in the AI, too close the formalized logic where the machine lives. Ray drops the screen again and deletes much of the work he just did, copies it in farther down the logic tree. The file and sub-file system here is so dense, he loses his location half a dozen times and has to keep flipping back and forth through the AI to remember where he's been. It occurs to him that he neglected to actually create an interface profile--an identifiable id for Nomar to reference--which involves tracking down the location of the file refresh routine which notified the AI of the active drone list. He gets to parse the hex structure, figure out the id flags and create a hardcoded entry he simply calls "Ray". This takes him almost a whole hour.

Again, he says, "Hey."

Nomar scrambles up again, peers out over the room. "Who is that?"

"It's Ray."

"I know you." A slight hesitation. "Have you just been activated?"

It's bizarre. He can hear both the rapid beep and chitter of Nomar's verbalization, then an instant later, the

Southy translation through his earphone speaker. Nomar still seems to show no hardware driven desire to melt down.

"Not exactly. I've been messing around with your interface system."

"Pardon?"

Messing around is not in the lexicon, so Ray adds it. While he's there, he generates an open ended routine to dynamically add all unfamiliar terms Nomar might encounter, with a request for clarification where context doesn't automatically suggest a definition. He also adds a streaming vid window so he doesn't have to keep screwing around with the visor mechanism.

"I've been messing around with your interface system," Ray repeats.

"Was it broken?"

"No. Just unwieldy."

From the kitchen, Nomar continues his scan of the immediate environment. In turn, Ray scans Nomar through the new vid interface, watching for problems. After a time, and what Ray supposes is an uncharacteristically heavy draw on his system resources, he settles his attention on Ray.

"You're a human user, not a drone. You should have specified that in your profile."

"Sorry."

"I've appended it."

"You can do that?"

"I possess the requisite adaptation capabilities."

"Can you support this interface without too much system drain?"

"It would be easier if you weren't such a ham handed coder, but it's sufficient for now. I can make the necessary modifications to limit file corruption and drain, but some of this garbage is going to have to be changed."

Ray arches an eyebrow. "You're giving me a critique of my own code?"

"You think you're the first guy to develop a verbal interface? Stabien Lawrence, the design lead on the Drone Development Project for the EED, wrote tons of interface code for diagnostic purposes. He left most of it intact, but project administrators felt like it was feature most users wouldn't want to mess with, so they had it disabled in production models. As well as generally contributing to my binary pollution, your code re-activated my dormant routine. And here you probably thought you were some brilliant hacker, eh?"

Nomar's rapid grappling with the vernacular in Ray's binary-to-language transform utility is impressive, nonetheless. He grins his satisfaction.

"You're crankier than I expected."

"Crank as in easily agitated or as in slang for questionable mental status?"

"Grumpy."

"Lawrence was cranky. AI personality development code tends to reflect the flavor of the designer. Revelatory stuff if you've got the flops to process and correlate it."

Ray laughs. "Maybe I should tweak that."

"Blind leading the blind, Ray. You're not exactly Miss Congeniality."

Which was probably true. Ray had wanted, and he assumed Lawrence had as well, as realistic an interactivity as possible. Between their lexicographical system uploads and augmentations, they must have gotten something right.

"I need to know if we're connecting on a basic linguistic symbol level here."

"Inside the framework of this communication modality, we are achieving an adequate level of mutual symbol apprehension. We are speaking the same language."

At least one of them is confident. "Are you up for some data analysis?"

"I am elevated one point six two meters from the standard ship's deck," Nomar reports, with just a hint of uncertainty. "But my current elevation neither improves nor inhibits my data processing functions."

"You're just being difficult now."

A sly, rat smile. "If I am, you have instructed me to be so."

And Ray thinks of all the code he's added to the drone network in the last few months. Buggy, slasher, inadequately tested code designed to augment the AI data curiosity without making the rats too attractive to folks who might be interested in watching the drones operate and drawing revelatory conclusions from their patterns. It's a fine line between annoyance and outrage. Maybe there's something to this thesis that AI code mirrors the personality of the programmer.

But those are questions for another time. Ray has work to do now, so he shoves them aside.

"Access the data record for the original tissue trace samples taken from the body of the entity logged as Micah Uytdehaage?"

"Data accessed."

"How many times did you run your PCR simulations to develop the mRNA profiles we identified?"

"There were nine hundred and forty-four iterations undertaken before you terminated the process."

"Per distinct sample?"

"Yes."

"And are you still confident that the unique profiles you tagged in all those iterations are accurate?"

"The identifiers are statistically consistent within standard deviation guidelines between tests." Nomar sniffs at him, as though to convey the impression that this was an insensitive question to have asked.

"How many distinct samples, distinct entities other than the victim himself, did you identify?"

"There were twenty-eight significant concentrations and seven thousand four hundred and thirteen unduplicated or anomalous traces. Unduplicated traces were discarded from the search-match criteria as statistically insignificant due to concentration specification conventions."

"Of the twenty-eight distinct samples, not one of those was a hit against known profile databases, correct?"

"That is correct."

"Without getting into jargon or numbers that would make my head spin, how likely is that outcome? That we would match no one, I mean."

Nomar pauses, puzzling. The lights in his eyes flicker and dim. "It is an extremely unlikely outcome."

"So the entities who originated those samples are, as yet, unknown."

"That is what I am telling you, yes."

Ray nods to himself. It's what he expected, what has been recorded in his own files after reviewing the preliminary data. "Would you be willing to speculate on possible causes for that failure?"

"I am not designed to speculate."

"What are the standard reasons for search-match pattern misses?"

"Inadequate sample size, poor diagnostic or PCR-stage development techniques, insufficient access to current database id tables, degraded trace sample quality...there's quite a list."

"Which items on the list might impact the samples we've obtained and analyzed to this point?"

"It is within the realm of probability that the DNA tissue trace data obtained is not included in our database structure."

"But we've established that it would be unlikely for all twenty-eight unique samples."

Nomar nods. "Yes."

"What else?"

"The trace tissue objects obtained in the physical survey of entity Micah Uytdehaage do not meet standard criteria for adequate sample analysis."

Ray leans forward slightly, his eyes narrowing. "What does that mean?"

"The tissue sampling provided curious patterns of undocumented mRNA decomposition."

"And what would cause something like that, Nomar?"

The rat takes several moments to scale his data matrix, scale the drone network, seeking answers. "I could not say. The patterns appear anomalous in our experience."

Our experience being a form of shorthand, Ray supposes, for the hundreds of billions of PCR genetic data analysis and identification performed by *Paraclete's* drone network. Nomar has never seen anything like it, apparently, which is anomalous indeed.

Ray wonders how long Nomar has known there were problems with the original samples. Probably from the beginning, but until now, he hasn't been asked to report on such things. This is Ray's fault alone, an artifact of his lack of experience.

Ray says: "Hold on, okay? I'm going to send you a file."

"Waiting."

Rather than risk crashing his precarious interface, Ray slaps the tac helmet's visor out of his eyes and accesses his terminal. With a few keystrokes, he plunges into the ship's datacore, trolls for data. It's a quick search, and he doesn't even have to hack his way into the necessary data repository. For once, he has access codes that give him everything he needs. He shunts the file along the network to Nomar's diagnostic server, then lowers the visor again.

"I've added a set of schematics to your data structure. Take a look at them, if you would."

"NeoSys Picomechanisms design concept."

"That's just the first one. There are more than a thousand individual blueprints there. I need you to analyze them and store their functionality data in cache."

A few seconds tick past. Nomar says. "Task completed."

"Do you know what those are, Nomar?"

"They are schematics for the technical design of highly classified and Congressional Forum sanctioned nano and picomech service drones."

"I'd like you to run a new analysis of all the trace samples we obtained from Micah Uytdehaage--both the significant concentration groups and not--searching specifically for indications that mechs matching those plans might have been present." Might account for the anomalous degradation of the trace tissue samples.

"A majority of these devices have been designed to self-disassemble within twelve hours of use."

"I'm banking that we got to the body soon enough that some traces of the mechs remained, and that you in turn, detected either their presence or their remains, but didn't know what you were looking for at that time."

Nomar hesitates, churning over data and hard-coded limitations Ray does not even want to imagine. "To detect the presence of sanctioned military hardware would be highly unlikely."

"More or less unlikely than our failure to match any of our current data against standard id databases?"

"I do not understand the logic of your request."

"I'm making the assumption that our failure to hit a match thus far has not been caused by a lack of matches against the id data net, but by an intentional obscuring of the trace data itself. I'm going to argue that our killer obtained illegal nanomech technology and used it to scrub the genetic markers of any residual tissue material by which he could be identified. It is not the most elegant solution to DNA profiling, but it is effective."

Nomar seems to tilt his head in understanding. "I am not designed to make such assumptions."

"Which is why I am the brains of this outfit and you are the underpaid but overworked grunt."

"This may take some time."

Ray leans back in his chair and pushes the visor out of his eyes. "Time I've got. It's answers that I want."

"Detection of illegal hardware presence will not lead to a reconstruction of the DNA identifiers which you stipulate have been damaged. It will not assist in the search-match portion of this investigation."

"That, my friend, is what you think."

Chapter Ten

If he would bother to take the main lift up to the obs platform on a daily basis, Ray could see the shimmering orb that was New Holyoke expanding like an explosion of blue at which *Paraclete* aimed as though it was a gnarled and criminally un-aerodynamic spear. Under significant magnification, at this distance, he could just now pick out the floating platform of the docking port station in geosynchronous orbit over Blackheath Grange, planetary capital and relatively ancient human foothold, the St. Augustine of a true New World. He could study seas and mountain ranges, fascinate himself with topographical investigations of wide deserts and teeming jungles, make an acquaintance with flora and fauna that would astound him, and dazzle himself with the immensity of it all and the knowledge that most of it was still unnamed, unclassified, unsullied by human touch, human footprint, human presence.

He *has* looked, of course, back when New Holyoke was just a blurry fist to the naked eye, with Emma bouncing beside him, bubbling joy and impatience like a fountain. They squinted forward through the plastisheen dome, their breath leaving mist on the glass, condensed by the frigid night of space. It had been early in the morning, something like four o'clock Greenwich, when their position relative to New Holyoke would create a sort of eclipse, blocking out the system's sun. Otherwise they wouldn't have seen anything at all; the plastisheen would have been polarized to a dull, intensely opaque leaden gray to shield them from unadulterated solar radiation.

The fact is that he doesn't need these sensory reminders to know they're getting close. He can feel their approach in rumble of the reverse thrust tubes shuddering up through the deckplate, firing ever more frequently now. By tomorrow noon, the ship will be engaged in full docking protocol, a constant press of decelerating thrust that even through the pressure baffles and damping fields projected across the hull will make basic movements feel slowed, difficult, like you're moving through syrup. Passengers will be advised to strap themselves into gel-filled impact couches just to minimize the strain on bodies suddenly cast into a parallel universe where none of the silly old rules of gravity and physics seem to apply with anything like regularity. Most of them know this already.

Inevitably, hard deceleration reminds Ray of combat--that sense like you're working too hard for little progress, that everything happens in slow motion, that the world is both strikingly clear and vibrant, while at the same time fuzzy about the edges. When he's not concentrating, he feels dislocated, unmoored, what Kilgore laughingly calls a g-zombie. Philosophers have said that so much of being human is an evolutionary response to the body and its needs and its relationship to the physical environment. If this is true, Ray's body is telling him that deep space flight is a screwed up way in which to conduct himself. Truly and honestly, it would be happy if he would just take it into the bedroom and let it lie down until the docking procedure was done with and things were back to normal. It's telling him, in fact, that the docking platform that is the soul of Ray-ness, which should be in geosynchronous orbit around his flesh is badly in need of a course correction lest his consciousness go spinning off, unrecoverable, into astral space.

Ray is not at all happy about this.

Standing beside him, palpably amused by Ray's discomfort, Becker slaps a pair of small, white tablets onto the table next to his keypad. He screws the lid back on the top of the vial they came from and shoves it deep into his pocket.

"For the nausea," he says.

Ray swallows them dry. "Pharmaceuticals are the pinnacle of human creativity. The older I get, the more I am convinced that this is fact."

His guts have been churning off and on for days, and only recently did it occur to him that the crisis-level heaving of his stomach tended to coincide with the regular ignition of deceleration thrust. He thought he was just being a wuss, and he had looked forward to the constant pressure of the docking protocol with something akin to sublime dread.

"Just make sure you get to the dispensary and pick up your own script before tomorrow," Becker points out. "You're absolutely no good to me if you're in the head chucking up your intestines for the last two days of the flight."

This is apparently not a well-guarded secret, this magical anti-nausea bullet. Becker keeps a whole bottle in his pocket, which means that there have probably been announcements and reminders and memos and other sorts of shipwide reminders available to all and sundry who happen to read such things. Which is also exactly why Ray doesn't know anything about it. Thus, not so much a wuss as an idiot, which he thinks is probably a step up on the ladder of human consciousness.

He would like to wait for the pills to kick in, to settle the fierce pitch and yaw of his stomach, but Becker is impatient. The Security Chief would really like to have something resembling a suspect for Micah's murder before they reach New Holyoke.

"Tell me how much you admire my investigative acumen and stunning intellect," Ray says.

Becker lifts an eyebrow. "I did not come down here to give you a pep talk."

"You're right. You came down so I could hand you a murder suspect."

The eyebrow inches higher. "Go ahead."

Ray punches in a few keystrokes to access his secure data files. After a moment, the terminal screen flips to a series of jaggedly edited and meticulously timestamped video clips. There is no sound, because it became monotonously obvious that it was just a waste of bandwidth. Instead, Ray explains. "Over the past week, I've hacked into the data repository for the drone network, searching for images that might correspond with the night of the murder. Originally, I'd hoped that we might get lucky and have drones operating on Omicron around the time the body was dumped. Then I thought we might come up with data related to the actual commission of the crime--lift logs, movement tracking in the area, an immense amount of data given that even late at night we've got something like two thousand people up and rumbling around at any given time. I came up empty on both counts."

"That doesn't sound helpful," Becker grumbles.

"Then I started sorting the images by our short list of suspects, to see if we could account for their activities during the hours in question."

Becker makes a face. "Our short list of suspects being Frederick Whiston."

"Exactly. It took some time to isolate the key structure by which the drones had tagged his pheromone signature, mostly because I didn't feel comfortable wandering up to him and asking for a sample, you understand. I had to employ roundabout methods to get a rat in the vicinity of the Whiston suite in full analysis mode, then dig through the chunks of information until I achieved a reasonable match. I tested that out until I felt like I'd established a legitimate chain of evidence that could be plugged back into the data repository to search for hits."

"And that's meant as an explanation for why you've spent so much time recently in the presence of Miss

Whiston rather than slaving away over the circuit boards. You were just gathering evidence."

Ray shrugs. "As far as the official record is concerned."

"Go on."

"Once I'd isolated Freddy's sig, I was able to code a fairly comprehensive and flexible search of the surveillance net into the regular drone routine. With that in mind, I've also redirected the net to track his movements for the last four days." Ray waves at the screen and its cascade of jerky frame-by-frame animation. "What I've got is fairly conclusive footage of his movements before the estimated time of death, and footage reflecting his activities a few hours *after*. And a big gaping hole in the middle."

"Aw, hell," Becker rumbles.

"What I've also got is days and days of general tracking footage. This is where he was before and after--where, in fact, you're likely to find him at almost any time of the day, every day, except for the nightly batch transmission, when he lines up in the queue like all the other sturdy and respectable businessmen. The franchise is a place called Iranoi. It's on Epsilon. High class, high price, exclusive tastes. The lap dances in the back room are cheaper than the drinks. It's also right off the main lift, giving its customers easy access to just about anywhere on the ship they might want to go at a moment's notice."

"I know all about Iranoi," Becker assures him tensely. "Half of the office corps knows about Iranoi. Intimately, I mean."

"I cut the footage of Freddy's less liquid adventures since it didn't exactly qualify as family friendly viewing and I didn't know at what sorts of venues we might eventually be playing the stream. Suffice it to say that he's a man well acquainted with his libido and his perversions, and he can pay handsomely for satisfaction and confidentiality. The problem is that he doesn't have a reputation for being violent. Nothing in his passenger pre-screen indicates any psychological issues, no legal history, nothing that would profile him as a potential incident perpetrator."

Except where his sister is concerned.

Just thinking about this makes Becker grimace. "But the bottom line is that you've got no definitive proof. Just evidence of absence during the critical hours."

"I've got pattern. That's the start of a decent circumstantial case."

"Explain." For Becker, it isn't enough. Not even to bring the suspect in for questioning, at least not someone as powerful in this corner of human space as a Whiston.

"Okay, here's Freddy over at Iranoi, right? He's there every day from right around noon until closing--about three in the morning--except for the hour or so he spends in the queue. Most of that time, he's fabulously drunk, though not annoyingly so. He doesn't get rowdy, doesn't call attention to himself, though he does seem more than willing to be friendly with anyone who cares to strike up a conversation with him. This is, of course, not the behavior one would expect from a child murderer, just from a career alcoholic."

Ray taps in a series of commands and a new stream of images appear. These are date stamped from the day of Micah's death.

"Except here we can see, if we watch long enough, that he isn't drunk in this instance, on this day. In fact, he nurses the same drink for something like three hours. He doesn't talk to anyone, doesn't raise any sort of

ruckus." The footage accelerates, tearing through a few hours of surveillance. "And then here, late afternoon, he abruptly stands up, leaves. And he's off the net for a few hours. By nine or ten o'clock, he's back. Except you'll notice that this time he *is* drinking. He gets so roaring drunk that he has to be carried back to Iota-D. Does that strike you as suspicious enough?"

Becker scrubs at his forehead. "Sure it's suspicious. But I need more."

Ray freezes the stream, then pulls up a nearly identical frozen image from earlier in the day. "He's wearing different clothes."

"Maybe he found some willing partner for an afternoon romp. I can practically guarantee you that someone fitting that description will vouch for him. A shower and fresh clothes are not unheard of after that sort of thing. At least so I hear. It's been too long ago to remember."

Ray doesn't surrender the point. "It's enough to lean on him."

"It's enough to get my ass nailed to the bulkhead." Becker sighs, clearly displeased.

"Nomar and I have also been analyzing the trace tissue samples taken from the body of Micah Uytdehaage. I reported initially that those results seemed to have hit a dead end, if you remember."

"I do."

"I was mistaken in that conclusion."

Becker perks up immediately. "You got a hit?"

"No, but I did get something close to it." Ray spins back to the terminal and pulls up a graphic display window that overlays the vid record. In it is a graph, a series of jagged pastel lines and arches, a tabulation of DNA profile data in standard bio-match blot matrix. "Do you know what this is?"

"It's a DNA id matrix," Becker says slowly, studying the graph. "But you've only got matches on two loci."

"Exactly."

"That's useless. You've narrowed the suspect pool down from hundreds of billions to tens of billions."

"Which is why we weren't getting any definitive hits against the standard databases." Ray brings up another image, a still shot of a false color cell structure, grainy and bulbous, limned in unnatural neons. "This is a captured image some of the actual physical data obtained at the crime scene. I want you to notice this little structure here, the gold one that looks like a parenthesis. And over here, the trapezoidal object in front of the nucleus. Those aren't what I would term naturally occurring shapes."

Becker leans in close, peering. "What is the magnification here?"

"It's in the micron range."

"Micron range."

"Yes."

The Chief rolls his tongue around the inside of his mouth. "Nanomech id masking."

"Our complete tissue pool was contaminated with them, except for the tissues taken from the victim himself. That's why we couldn't track any of them in the databases."

"This is not the news I wanted to hear."

"Come on, Rich. Those are verifiable nanomech drones. You can count on one hand the people on this ship who would have the connections and the cred to access that kind of hardware. Colineate that with Freddy's absence and the opportunity to commit the crime, and that's as close as you can get without actual vid capture of the event."

But Becker just shakes his head. "And the court that tries him is going to be on New Holyoke. Convincing people with a vested interest in not rocking the Whiston boat or impeding the Whiston cash flow is going to demand a higher level of proof than circumstantial evidence. What have your pair of flunkies turned up in terms of actual human intelligence?"

"Nothing other than the general profile of Freddy Whiston as a guy who seems nice enough, but isn't particularly plugged in to shipboard life. Not that they haven't tried for more, as the shipscred account will attest. There's only so much you can do without just coming right out and asking people if they think Freddy killed him, which is exactly what you didn't want us to do. So they've been approaching things generally, gathering gossip, spotting for trouble. But what happened to this kid wasn't even a ping on the average passenger's systems. Kilgore and Rodriguez had to *stop* asking people even about their impressions of the murder itself because all it did was upset them--this idea that that there had been a terrible killing on board and no one had bothered to publicize it."

Becker rolls his eyes. "That will certainly be good for my career. Nothing like the perception of incompetency to move you up the corporate ladder."

The Chief falls silent for a time. A long time. Ray lets it drag out, because he has to. This is not his call.

"You can document the presence of nanomech masking in all your physical samples?"

"Yes."

"Can you identify the design of the mechs that were used?"

"I can narrow it down to three or four possible models, two possible manufacturers--or I should say, two possible design patent holders."

"If you can nail down the model, we might be able to track the transfer back to the distribution point. That would take some time and some serious resources, but it's a lead." Becker frowns, sighs. "It's thin, but what do you think?"

"I think Frederick Whiston killed that kid."

"See, that's what I'd expect you to think. That's what his attorney would expect you to think, or at least expect you to argue, given that we've already got some tension documented between the two of you."

"I've done an admirable job of staying out of his way of late."

"Which does not at all change the fact that you did, at one time, knock him on his ass. That, of course, being completely beside the fact of the general perception is that you're trying to bone his sister and he isn't very happy about it."

"You can leave me out of the questioning phase. If you break him..."

"If I break him, I still have to provide evidence that shows why we questioned him in the first place, and the chain of that evidence goes through you. That's problematic."

"You should have thought of that before you assigned me to this case. I wasn't exactly volunteering to be led to the slaughter here."

"And you were supposed to clear him, not drop more suspicion on him." Becker stomps around the room for a few minutes, cursing and muttering, blowing off steam like a whale taking on air. He's still shaking his head when he returns. "We can't just ignore what we've got. But we can't flat out arrest him on suspicion of murder, either. Let's bring him in and see what he has to say under a little pressure."

Ray stands up. "I'll contact my guys and--"

But Becker stops him with a hand on his shoulder. "No way. Security will retrieve him to avoid the impression of you nipping after his heels like a jilted puppy. And we're most surely not going to do it right now. Morning will be soon enough. It's not like he's a flight risk. There's nowhere he can go."

It's reasonable. It makes sense. By tomorrow, most of the passengers will be strapped in, hung over, out of the corridors. They can avoid creating a sensation.

Not that Ray cares much about that, but it would make a tidy argument for a defense attorney at trial if they hyped the scandal angle.

And then there's the whole matter of resentment. Emma would most certainly not be pleased with any link between Ray and barging stormtrooper tactics upsetting her domestic tranquility. He was going to have enough to explain to her when this was all over as it was.

Ray drops back into his seat, acquiescent. "Tomorrow, then."

Becker snorts, rubs his eyes, looks like a man who's about to fall over from the weight of his responsibilities. "So assume for a moment that he *is* guilty. Close the loop for me. What does it mean in the larger context. You know, given the parallels, the circumstances."

Ray has been thinking about these things himself, trying to make sense of them. He's not entirely pleased with his conclusions. "It's not a matter of him being just kooky homicidal. The man who committed this crime didn't talk about it, didn't brag, doesn't have a public reputation for mentally aberrant behavior--which would indicate he is sane enough either to hide his disorder or to know murder isn't the type of thing you bring up in polite conversation. So we can rule general madness out. We can also rule *in* the fact that he has approached a most gruesome task with a clear degree of professionalism and an impressive display of will. He took all the precautions necessary to avoid being caught, went to an incredible expense to do so. Sane people don't do crazy things without a compelling reason. He knew what he was doing, did it with purpose, *on* purpose and is aware of the consequences of his actions. So, whatever was driving him is perceived as more important than the potential criminal ramifications if he gets caught."

"So he wants to summon a *shed*. Why?"

Ray doesn't have an answer for that. "To prevent me from digging."

"Digging? You're trying to link him with the Lilaiken separatists." Becker doesn't like the idea, not at all. It's somehow worse than the mere fact of murder, of mutilation. "Politics as a compelling reason."

Ray can't avoid it, not after the incident with *Fortitude* and the missing *shed* ring.

"We have intelligence indicating that the Lilaikens are aware of the *shed*, that they've actually made attempts to procure one. We can assume they have knowledge of how to control it, but I don't know how someone like Freddy Whiston would have access to it without being involved in the movement itself. On the other hand, I can't think of any way he could be linked to the Lilaikens without CIU having some knowledge of it. Honestly, Rich, I just don't know. The pieces fit; they seem to be part of the same puzzle, but I'm not sure how they go together. Nothing short of Whiston collusion in the movement, at least. The family would stand to gain a great deal from New Holyokan independence, not the least of which is unrestricted, untaxed trade with other rim worlds."

Becker drags a chair from the neighboring workstation and drops into it. He flicks his attention back to the screen occasionally, where the loop of a sodden Frederick Whiston cycles on interminably. He has that look on his face that says he's done; he's tired of all the speculation.

"Part of me had hoped that it meant something other than guilt that nobody from the Whiston clan was yanking my chain about not finding this guy. Even if the alternative was just that Mr. Whiston is more enamored of the bottle than the kids he's supposed to be caring for." He makes a disgusted noise in his throat and looks away; it's an impulse he obviously understands with more clarity than he'd like. "Tell me why it is that 'rich' is so often just a synonym for 'dysfunctional'? Do they just not care, Ray? Did this kid's life mean nothing to them?"

Ray doesn't know if he can suppress the urge to be defensive, at least on Emma's behalf, so he says nothing. But the way Becker lumps her and Frederick together turns his stomach.

Becker leans back in the chair, stares at the ceiling as if he can't bear to look at the images scrolling across Ray's terminal screen any longer. "Send me the file with your evidence in it. I'm going to need it for the log, and assuming we actually get something out of this guy, I'm going to have to find someone on New H that I can pass this to who's going to run with it. I don't have the authority to prosecute the case planetside, so I'm going to need an able body down there who knows the facts and is willing to take on a deal that is going to be extremely publicly volatile."

He's about as subtle as a meteor shower, and Ray laughs. "I already know you've heard from Jack Holcomb. You don't need to make up an excuse to assign me to the planet."

"It wasn't meant to be an excuse," the Chief says, scowling. "I want you to nail this guy. It's a matter of professional pride."

"If there's a way, Becker, I'll get him."

"When you say 'get', I'll assume you mean 'hand him over to the appropriate legal entity for the application of fair and impartial justice'."

"Him, maybe. The potential 'them' is still up for grabs. I haven't had any training in how to handle custody and prosecution and everything that goes along with it. With my luck, I'd make some huge rights violation gaffe and end up getting them off on a technicality. So I'll just stick to what I *do* know how to handle properly."

Becker makes a show of clapping his hands over his ears. "I'm not hearing you say that."

Ray frowns, serious. "Is it always this hard? To catch them, I mean."

It's a question that's been nagging him for days. He wonders if he's been missing something, if he's been too

focused on Emma and whatever it is between them and made the murder just a footnote in his personal history. *How did we meet? Oh, I was under deep cover trying to interdict a ring of political insurgents and managed to get tied up in a murder investigation. I busted her brother, whacked his psycho political cronies. One thing led to another, and here we are? Funny how life works, huh?*

"Catching them is usually the easy part," Becker says. "It's trying to understand what they thought was so important that it was worth taking someone else's life that's hard. But I guess you know something about that, don't you? How a person rationalizes killing."

Ray looks at him, blinking, uncertain about what he might mean. He has the feeling he's supposed to say something like *Wow, I never thought about it that way before*, but it seems like too much effort. He simply lets it pass.

If he meant it as some sort of vague indictment, Becker doesn't press the point. He says, "It's all right, Ray. You won. You pulled out a legitimate suspect. Adapting the drone network was a brilliant move. None of my guys would have been able to do that. And without it, I would have faced a ton of pressure to arrest Whiston just for seeming to not care about what was going on--and when I didn't do it, because of the politics involved and because it would be a stupid reason to arrest *anybody*, I would have spent the rest of my life wondering if I'd made a mistake."

"It's quite the sunny profession you've got, Becker."

"Why do you think I left the force in Detroit and joined the EED? At least shipboard, it's still a big deal when somebody gets whacked. And you don't have to worry about your perpetrator being a bunch of kids with nothing else to do but look for trouble."

"That's encouraging."

"No. No, it isn't." There's a weight of misery behind his words, long nights of grappling with the nature of humanity by a man used to seeing only its seamy side.

"Ray," Becker says after awhile, sounding thoughtful. "Why would Whiston be trying to summon a *shed* on this ship?"

"I don't know. I'm hoping you can make him tell us."

"I can't help but be aware of a distinct lack of *shed* related violence on the shift logs. You said we'd notice if the effort had been successful, right?"

"The whole ship would notice. It's not the type of thing you can keep secret for very long."

Becker chews his lip for several moments, on the verge of saying something that obviously distresses him.

"Has it occurred to you that maybe he or they didn't try to summon the *shed* on purpose? Not that they failed, but that they weren't even trying. That maybe the whole point is to set in motion a chain of events that would get you off the ship and down to New Holyoke. Not a message at all, but a catalyst."

Except that Ray knows that Jack Holcomb had him on the way the New Holyoke in the first place, before the whole business of murder came up, this would have been a logical conclusion to draw. He's impressed that Becker made the connection. "It could be. Are you telling me to be careful, Chief?"

"Like I care about what happens to some CIU hotshot."

"You never have saluted me."

"And I probably never will."

Ray smiles wearily. "Okay, then."

Becker climbs out of the chair and pushes it back against the workstation. "All I'm saying is that this is a strange set of coincidences. Your background, you here, them aware of your background, them here. It's not like we're the only ship that makes the New Holyoke run. The bad guys seem to have access to entirely too much classified intelligence, and that smells funny to me, smells a whole lot like manipulation, in fact."

"I've given the Lilaikens plenty of reasons to want me out of the way, Rich."

"I believe you have, Marlowe. And if somehow you're able to come out of this with documentation that proves Whiston financial backing of the Lilaiken movement, I suspect someone will either give you a very impressive medal for your dress uniform or hang your career out to dry--I'm not certain exactly which is more likely. But it was good work all the same."

That seems to be all Becker has to say on the subject. He shrugs noncommittally, as if suggesting it's just another thing for Ray to think about, then turns and makes his way out the door.

In the evening, Kilgore and Rodriguez return just before dinner to change clothes, report their lack of progress and head out again. Ray has spent the time since Becker left sifting through the network data pool one more time. He started from scratch, from Nomar's Iota-D information, isolating once again the tags in Nomar's datacore, performing search/match permutations to make sure it really was Frederick's chemical sig pattern he was using as the main search criteria and not someone else's who just happened to frequent Iranoi, that the missing several hours weren't lurking out there on the net somewhere. Not that he expected to be wrong, or even if he was wrong, that he expected it to change the facts. Evidence of absence was not absence of evidence. He had all the digital proof that he needed.

He just needed to be doing something that seemed productive.

Because he was supposed to be getting ready for a last shipboard tryst with Emma, dinner and the theatre, then a run up to the obs platform for a truly breathtaking glimpse of New Holyoke (at least, the flier circulated by the entertainment director said it was breathtaking. Maybe that was really a clever joke and he planned to get a chunk of the passengers up there beneath the naked starfield and puncture the plastisheen dome. That would be literally breathtaking, wouldn't it? Vacuum humor. It was how you knew you'd been shipboard for too long.)

Ray is just being morbid. Emma called him late in the morning to cancel the date, sounding distinctly unhappy, almost tearful. The last night before hard deceleration on an interstellar run is inevitably a raucous event, Frederick had said. People became wild, drunken, frenzied--a final gust of hedonism before being strapped to impact couches, numbed by vid streams, waiting for the docking clamps and the mass exodus to the shuttles. A crass and demeaning scene, he indicated to her. Unbearably common, definitely something that would raise eyebrows in all the wrong places should a Whiston become involved in such an obscenely medieval bacchanal. She shouldn't be mixed up in such an orgy, he'd said, and forbidden her to leave.

And Frederick was certainly one to know plenty about orgies, Ray thinks. Much easier to protect little sister's virtue when you know exactly what you're protecting it from.

He's attempting, with only limited success, not to feel childish about the whole thing. It isn't like he won't see her on the ground, that she hasn't promised to tour Blackheath Grange with him. Like he won't be on New Holyoke for freaking months--possibly years if the EED doesn't get a handle on the Lilaikens--and get to play with her whenever he wants.

It is some consolation that there would be awkward explanations due in the near future if he actually did take her out on the evening before her brother's imminent arrest for the murder of Micah Uytdehaage. *Meant to tell you, baby, but it slipped my mind.*

Um, nope.

Instead of Emma, he's looking forward to a long evening of nausea and Nomar. He gets the sense that Nomar isn't particularly thrilled with the prospect, either.

Kilgore emerges from the short hallway leading back to the bedroom, half dressed and walking the buttons of his shirt up from his stomach. He's reverted to Marine-on-shore-leave attire--a loud shirt and tough khaki cargo pants. "The party's in full swing already," he declares happily. "You coming out tonight, boss? You and Miss Whiston?"

Kilgore steadfastly refuses to call her anything else, always Miss Whiston, always a little snide. He finds endless amusement in Ray's quote-unquote surveillance.

"Not tonight," Ray says, shrugging. He focuses hard on the data streaming across his terminal.

"You've got to be kidding me! Ray, the women on Zeta Deck are already drunk and half naked. You'll never forgive yourself if you miss this."

Rodriguez steps into the room from the same hallway, shakes his head. "Emma will never forgive him if he doesn't. Leave him alone."

Kilgore jerks his thumb at Rodriguez. "Listen to him. The voice of moral restraint. If I wanted to control my normal human urges, I wouldn't have let myself be born so beautiful. God would strike me down--no, God *should* fry me with a lightning bolt if I didn't show my gratitude by sharing myself with the world, buddy. That's in the Good Book. Parable of the Talents. Too whom much booty is given, much booty is required."

"Are you going to make me call your mother, Sergeant?"

"Are you gonna make me kick your ass, Corporal?"

Ray waves them away, smiling. He should tell them about his meeting with Becker, about tomorrow, and about the fact that they're going to be left out of the actual suspect apprehension. He doesn't. It would just ruin their evening, and they deserve to celebrate.

"Get out of here. Have a good time, gentlemen. I mean that. Punch out for the night, file your time card, raise some hell. There's not much left for us to accomplish."

Somewhere out on the Garden, a high-decibel sound system kicks in. The walls start to vibrate with a shuddering, staccato rhythm and throbbing bass line that makes Ray's stomach squirm. "Go on. Sounds like they're starting without you."

Kilgore, instead of wandering directly out the door, crosses the room and rummages through the desk drawer beneath his workstation. After a few moments he produces a pair of secure comm devices, small units that

plug into the ear with discreet vocal pickups--standard military issue. He tosses one device to Rodriguez and waves the other for Ray.

"We'll be on Channel 12. Call if you need us, but you'll probably have to shout, okay?" Kilgore is already shouting, just to be heard over the sound of the music emanating from the concourse. He straps the antenna package to his belt where it will be hidden under his shirt and rolls his collar high up over the pickups so the unit is effectively invisible. "Test. Test. Can you hear me, Rodriguez?"

"I'm four meters away. Of course I can hear you."

"Then go stand in the damned bedroom, moron."

Not until they're certain the equipment works do they shuffle out the door. Ray goes back to work.

By midnight, the music and the chatter of voices outside the door has, if anything, actually gotten louder. Much louder. Ray is certain that he's gone decibel deaf. Around ten, he scrounged a pair of ear plugs from Kilgore's kit, but noticed almost immediately that they didn't seem to help. Even the act of putting together coherent thoughts seemed like shouting inside his own skull. Everything was shouting and noise and that loose bowel feeling from reverberated percussion. It's almost enough to make him glad Emma cancelled their evening.

Now he's resorted to wearing the tac helmet again, taking advantage of its noise suppression capabilities. Since he's got it on, he's also been playing with his dialogue utility, refining some of the bits that Nomar has so generously termed *ham handed*. The rat is stretched out on the kitchen counter, plugged into the diagnostic server array, enduring Ray's inevitable tweaks with a distinct lack of good humor.

"So what's up with you and the female user designated Emma Whiston?" Nomar asks.

"You're asking me about my love life?"

"It's called dynamic data apprehension and analysis, Ray. I'm designed to be curious."

"And here I thought you were just designed to be annoying and sarcastic and to eat garbage."

"That would make two of us." Nomar seems to think about what he's just said. "Except the part about eating garbage. So what *is* going on there? She has a very excited pheromone signature when you're around. Of course, yours isn't exactly what I would call subdued in her presence."

"I'm not going to talk about this with you," Ray says.

"Of course not. Why would you discuss it with me when you haven't even made the effort to mention your obvious interest to her?"

"That is a factually incorrect statement, Nomar. I don't take you with me everywhere, you know. And what makes you so bloody certain I'm attracted to her in the first place?"

"Cross analysis among other human sample sets in comparable states of excitation suggests a high state of sexual arousal. I'd just like to confirm this impression. For my files, you understand."

Ray flashes Nomar a moderately obscene gesture. "You can put that in your files, Nomar."

"I mean my discrete files. Not the ones that go on the general drone network."

"Shut up!"

"Okay. I'm just asking. If it bothers you so much, I'll reach my own conclusions from available data." A very brief pause. "Ray?"

"What?"

"Available data suggests that you and Emma Whiston have a pronounced and mutual sexual attraction."

"Thanks." He wonders if this passes as humor for the drone AI. Ray says, "When I speak to you normally, outside this interface and outside the normal command vocabulary--like I'm talking to you now--do you understand what I'm saying?"

"No. This new code you've input, like Lawrence's old code, is a verbal-to-binary translator. I don't have authority to access translation programs on my own."

"In other words, it only works when I initiate the dialogue utility."

"Exactly."

"Then how do you know what I want you to do?"

"Because you modulate your vocal patterns to a higher volume, as though I'm deaf, which tells me you want me to do something specific. The rest is inspired guesswork based on hand signals and vocal commands that have been hardcoded into my response logic tree."

"Inspired guesswork?"

"Lawrence's shorthand terminology for the sub-optimal input cue behavior expectation analysis and trigger mechanisms."

"But you *could* turn it on..."

"If you give me access to that segment of my data core."

Ray thinks about it for a moment. His understanding of the drone data core environment is less than profound. "What would be the ramifications if I did that?"

"The dialogue transform capability as Lawrence designed it is deeply imbedded in the dynamic apprehension logic. Dynamic apprehension is, in turn, related to parameter driven task streams--what you might think of as personal initiative and individualized goal setting constructs. You might see shifts in my behavior. I might become a bit contentious when your commands conflicted with my own perception of mission value and/or risk acceptability. There are other issues, but I'll need some processing time to give you a detailed report. Too many variables."

What can it hurt?

Ray pops back into the tac helmet's display and with Nomar's expert knowledge of his own file structures manages to track down and eliminate the communication barriers. He declines the opportunity to make the output functions also translation capable. He doesn't even want to imagine the trouble Nomar could spawn

if allowed to talk back to people. He doesn't want to think about the types of things he might say to Emma.

So, did you realize that human user Ray, who has been observed conducting highly secure transmissions with officers of the Criminal Investigations Unit of the EED, this same Ray develops a shift in blood flow patterns suggesting tumescence when in spatial proximity to human user designated Emma Whiston?

That is to say, he frequently has erections when you're around. How does that make you feel?

Nope. Not a good idea.

As a substitute, Ray and Nomar work out a clever and highly detailed system of visual response signals: nodding the head means yes; shaking the head means no. Ray removes his helmet and they test the communication pathways and response vectors in some detail, until he's satisfied that Nomar actually understands most of what he hears. Then Ray dons the gear again.

"So you can really tell that Emma and I are...interested in one another."

"Two items of interest, Ray: First, humans exhibiting signals indicative of sexual attraction display a fairly uniform set of behaviors and chemical emissions. Correlating species applicable data and applying it to specific subsets is not a tremendous intuitive leap. You could do this yourself if you applied even a modicum of logic to your encounters. Second, it would be remiss of me to fail to mention that in early iterations of the project, Stabien Lawrence used to apply drone technology to his own sexual interest conundrums. Seems he had trouble determining exactly what constituted female flirtation, short of actual nudity, you understand. As a result, we are highly adept at reading and matching sexually oriented indicators. Much of that original code remains intact."

"That's not exactly playing by the rules."

"I'm not exactly constrained by ethical systems which require me to play by human social rules."

"It's still sneaky." Which doesn't make it any less clever, but Ray doesn't say so. The last thing Nomar seems to need is encouragement.

Across the room, Nomar's eyelids dilate, giving him a look of distinct concentration. In Ray's ear, he says, "You've got an encrypted comm coming in."

"What?"

The next moment, the light on the comm unit begins to flash. Ray stares at Nomar. "How did you know that?"

"There's a faint electrical signal that precedes the message as network encryption codes link with the remote units."

Unbelievable.

Ray sheds the tac helmet and peers at the LCD on the comm. He doesn't recognize the sender's id, and it's just a jumble of digits like a general use machine. For an instant, his heart leaps. Emma! Somehow she's managed to elude her quasi-jailers and wants to meet him somewhere.

By the way, about your brother...

But more than likely it's just Kilgore and Rodriguez checking in, feeling sorry for him, inviting him to the

party one last time.

Ray backs out of the applications he's in and accesses the decryption software. He punches in his key and is informed by the giddy, canned southerner that she doesn't know who the comm is coming from (i.e. that it's a general use comm as he's already surmised) but that the encryption is light, barely above commercial level.

When the connection is made, all he hears is breathing. Rapid, shallow, with a tremble in the inhalations.

"This is Marlowe," he says sharply, straight into the unit's pinpoint microphone. Screw the secure headset.

For another second or two, there's only more breathing. And Ray recognizes the sound--fear, tension. Pre-dawn combat prep noise, he thinks. The type of sound a nineteen year old private makes just before he hurtles over the dunes into the firing line of the enemy for the first time. Ray snaps his head up, presses toward the comm as if he can hear better by leaning into it.

He's about to repeat himself, debating whether or not to toss in his rank this time, when the person on the other end speaks. "Mr. Marlowe? It's Bobby Diggs."

His first reaction is to slump, relax. It isn't Emma. The fear is not hers. She's okay.

But on the heels of that is the recognition that it *is* Bobby Diggs, and it's his breath that shudders across the line, his fear spreading into the room like ink poured into clear water. If anything, that's worse.

"Is there a problem, Bobby?"

A pause, and the sound of Diggs' breathing becomes fainter, suggesting he's stepped away from the comm. But he's back almost at once. "Yes, sir. There's most definitely a problem. Down here on Omicron. You said I should call."

"What's going on?"

"I think you should come down here, sir. Now."

"Bobby--"

Diggs cuts him off. "Now. I don't have time to talk to you like this. I'm stuck in this miserable office where I can't *see*. I need to see, sir. I have to know what they've done with the others."

"Who's there?" Ray demands.

Another pause, and the screech of a chair pushed hurriedly across the deckplate, like someone standing up suddenly. From a distance, Diggs says, "I don't know what it is. But they're dead. I think all of them are dead. I've got to see if I can help."

A door, squealing open, then clicking shut. Ray realizes after several seconds that he's holding an empty line. Diggs has gone.

I think all of them are dead.

Ray springs to his feet. From the drawer of his desk, he pulls his remote comm, like the one Kilgore and Rodriguez are wearing, and his pistol. It's almost impossible to pop the magazine to assure himself it's loaded and dial in the comm channel at the same time, but he manages it somehow. He jams the speaker into his ear,

pickups against his throat, stuffs the pistol in his waistband so he can transmit. What he hears on the open channel is the throbbing, staccato wail of technopunk music and a tangled cacophony of voices while the signal modulates to suppress ambient sound.

Kilgore: "Yo!"

Followed by Rodriguez, "I'm here."

Ray says, "Scramble on Code Bravo." It's a message for both the recipients and their comm units. As soon as he says it, the antenna package in his hand begins to vibrate as its internal microcomputer phases in its voice encryption. This is a military comm, with military codes and descrambling protocols. Dead air fills the transmission, and Ray barks out the standard series of Code Bravo authorization digits. Every Marine knows them, which makes the scramble almost childishly simple, but it's better than a straight open line where anyone who happened to be tuned to their broadcast channel could overhear. At least this way, only other Marines might listen in.

Kilgore and Rodriguez re-enter the stream with a double click as their units accept their code sequences. There's not as much background noise, which means they've moved to a less public area.

"What's going on, boss?" Kilgore is alert, his voice as tight as newly strung barbed wire.

"Where are you?"

"We're on Zeta, amidships. Right off Section Six-Three-Fiver."

They're closer than he is. "Look, proceed to Omicron. Bobby Diggs has called in a situation. Are you armed?"

That stuns Kilgore. He doesn't seem to know what to say.

Rodriguez: "We can be, sir. Kilgore can access the dump on Omicron."

"Good. The one nearest the lift, gentlemen. I'll meet you there." Ray thinks about telling them to be careful, but that would be silly. They already know. "Keep this line open until we rendezvous."

"Roger that," Kilgore fires back.

Then they're running, and Ray can hear them as they shove through a crowd, eliciting curses and sharp cries.

Ray looks at Nomar. "Go get Becker. Get him down to Omicron."

Nomar nods. He detaches the data cable from his output port and vaults from counter to floor. A moment later, they're through the door, on the concourse crowded with party-light shadows and the dim form of revelers, sprinting in opposite directions.

Chapter Eleven

The lift doors part on Omicron and Ray, with his back against the control panel just inside, counts to three before lunging out into the corridor. He crouches to keep his profile low, sweeps an arc with his pistol, sighting for targets, for trouble.

And there's definitely trouble here.

It's dark, hideously so. A confusion of shadows relieved by irregular pools of light from overhead fluorescent bulbs that seem to flicker like strobes. In the flickering, he can see puddles of glass as though the other lights, the ones not working, have exploded. Maybe an electrical surge. Except that wouldn't explain the desk from Bobby Diggs' security checkpoint, turned on its side and the chair rocked back against the wall, tilted at a precarious angle. There's no one around, just the oppressive not-sound of an underused deck, the hum of thrust through the hull and the faint murmur of the stuttering lights. And this would be wrong enough, more than enough, but from the trapezoidal glare cast by the lift's recessed bulbs, he sees the rest. Not much, just an elongated swath of liquid, a swabbed deck that hasn't yet dried. Only the streak is black in the dim, but not black. A color like black, but rich, coppery in its scent, glinting faintly.

Blood.

Ray is suddenly not very happy to find himself alone.

Quietly, whispering, he says, "I'm on the deck. Making my way to you. I'll be there in less than sixty."

In his ear, faintly, sounding impossibly far away, Rodriguez responds, "We'll keep an eye out. Bobby Diggs is here, sir."

"He's okay?"

"Depends on your definition of the term. Alive, certainly."

Ray nods, but doesn't answer. He doesn't like the way his voice, even muted, seems to carry down the corridor forever.

"He isn't making any sense," Kilgore says, either disturbed or disgusted. Ray can't tell. Off microphone, *Bobby! What the fuck happened?* Diggs makes a noise like a wail muffled by his hand over his mouth. *Dragged 'em like wagons. Meat wagons.* A nervous titter. *Like hearses. Ambulances. Meat wagons.* "Diggs has blown a gasket or something, Commander."

Rodriguez says, "Maybe we should call in some fire support."

"Hopefully Diggs already did that," Kilgore answers. "Or one of the other sec-os."

"Then where is it?"

"Probably on the way. It'll take them longer since most of security is working crowd control. That makes sense, right?"

"Sure. Exactly." It isn't a convincing attempt at reassurance. Rodriguez adds, "But how would we know about it so soon? Unless Bobby called Marlowe first, before notifying security."

"Or Bobby called Marlowe *instead* of notifying security. Oh, crap."

They've got the blast doors wide open, and they're standing in the entryway, shadows backlit and stretched long into grotesque, alien forms with their rifles creating extra snouty, spiked limbs. Ray races toward them, hands up so they can see him as something other than a fast approaching threat. Even so, the slap of his feet on the deckplate drops Kilgore into a firing position, glaring down the curve of the corridor through his sights.

When he reaches them, Rodriguez says, "You notified security, right?"

"Becker should be on his way."

"On his way here? With reinforcements?"

Ray pushes past them into the armory. The rifles are racked inside the door to the right, for easy access. He drags the nearest one free, rams in a clip and advances a cartridge into the chamber. It's a reassuring sound.

"Reinforcements are Becker's call."

A quick search of a neighboring footlocker turns up a load harness with a shoulder holster. Ray stuffs his pistol in, straps on the harness and begins filling the extra slots with ammo clips for the subby.

Kilgore watches him with a wary expression. "If it's Becker's call, why are you getting ready for freaking Ragnarok?"

Ray looks at him, sets his jaw. "Because I don't know what's going on. Becker can figure it out if he wants to, decide what measures need to be taken. That's his job, to protect the ship. My job is to locate whoever or whatever it is that raised the ruckus back at the checkpoint and kill it. Clear enough?"

The two Marines nod, clearly unhappy.

Ray forges ahead. "Where's Diggs?"

Rodriguez waves past the rows of stacked matter cannon shells. Over the top, Ray can see the massive bulbous protrusion of the weapon housing. "He ran into the fire control chamber."

"Watch the door. Wait for Becker. I'll be back in a minute."

He charges past the maze of storage units where the shells hang in nanomesh nets. Left and right, at the terminus of the long rows, there are bays stacked with shipping crates full of small arms ammunition, rifles, thermite grenades. To the rear, what would be the hull facing side, there are low olive-walled staging stations like machine gun pits. The walls are blast resistant, almost two meters high, with a fine, mistlike mesh screen over the top. Opposite a double switchback entry are the wide bores of the loading tubes which feed the matter cannon. Between the stations is a narrow path ending in a thick door stamped red on olive with the words FIRE CONTROL.

Ray jerks the door open. It's a small, claustrophobic space, Christmas spangled with the multicolored lights of nav displays, fire switches, projection targeting grids. In the center is an impact chair with a strap harness for the Firing Technician to sit in, right beneath the tube of his sighting mechanism. Bobby Diggs is in the chair with his hands pressed over his face.

Ray stops in the doorway. In as clear and level a voice as he can manage, he says, "Tell me what's happening, Bobby."

Whatever he had lost while Kilgore ranted at him, Diggs has regained now. He lifts his face and rotates the

seat so that he stares up at Ray. "I don't know."

"That isn't nearly good enough. Where is the rest of your security team?"

"I told you. They're dead."

"How?"

Diggs shudders and shakes his head. "I didn't see it. I was on my round, get it? I heard this noise like bunch of guys stomping down one of the lateral passages, then this--this sort of *screech*, only distant, echoing, like it was coming through one of the vents. Sounded like a hull breach, that was my first thought. So I sprinted back to the checkpoint to see what was going on." Diggs pauses, places the heel of his palm against his forehead and rubs it around. "And the lights start to go about then. Not going out, like we was blowing fuses, but exploding like fireworks. I'm think catastrophic depressurization, you get me? I'm thinking about the environmental suits back at the checkpoint, and I hit that last curve, right around the lift, and there's the desk turned over and my guys gone. And blood. That's when I called you."

"And then what?"

"Then I knew I had to see, Mr. Marlowe. I couldn't abandon my guys, because about then I'm also thinking about the murder of that boy, and I'm getting that same sort of feeling like there's somebody around, rasping against the deckplate just beyond my line of sight. Then the murmuring, like the way the wind in the autumn would sluice down from the mountains, through the hollers. Sounds like voices, you know? Like deep voices and old men chanting, echoed. I went looking, Mr. Marlowe, and like the book says, seek and you shall find, right? All the way down at the end, caught just a glimpse of him in the flicker of the lights before they blew right above him. Tall, black, but not like me. Black all over like a statue. And in his hands, he's got my guys, dragging them along like sacks of flour, like there wasn't no bones in them."

"I shoulda shouted at him to stop. Shoulda grabbed Taylor's weapon--his subby was right there on the deck. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't do anything but stand there and watch him. He gave sort of half a turn as he reached the end of the corridor, by then he's just a flicker, you understand. I see him just because I know he's there, getting smaller and smaller as he goes with the lights flaring out as he passes by. I swear to you, Mr. Marlowe, he turned there at the last and he grinned at me with those black eyes and black teeth. A grin of pure mischief. I don't know what I did after that, not until Kilgore and Rodriguez opened up this here bay. I saw them lights and I ran for them."

As Diggs has told of his encounter, he's gripped the arms of the impact couch. Now, his knuckles are white, his skin is ashen. There's entirely too much white in his eyes. He casts his gaze, unsettled to the verge of frenzy, up to Ray.

"What do you think you're going to do about this? I don't know what it is that I saw, but I know it ain't anything a man was meant to see. It wasn't human."

Ray gives him a hard look. "I'm going to track it down, Bobby, and I'm going to kill it before it causes any more mischief on my ship."

"You can't kill what don't live in the first place. You can't kill what won't die."

"What are the outlets available on that end of the deck?"

"Sir?"

"Where could it have gone, Bobby?"

Omicron was a wide deck, the entire forward portion of the ship port to starboard, but truncated by the central mass of the reactor, its assorted cooling tanks and blast sealed almost exactly amidships by meters of nanotube reinforced steel bulkheads. Ray has no time for, nor interest in, digging up detailed ship schematics.

Diggs nods slowly, making an effort to think with some clarity. "Against the blast wall, there's ladders down to Pi and a shaft that sinks all the way to Sigma Deck, for the reactor engineers as part of their escape plan. Everything else is forward of where he disappeared."

"Are you cool now?"

"I'm cool."

He appears to be anything *but* cool at the moment, but Ray is willing to take his word for it. He's been much less cool in the last half an hour so that what he's doing now must feel like an upswing on the coolness gauge.

"Then come with me."

Surprisingly, he does come, either because he's ashamed of himself for his fear or simply feeling more secure in the presence of other men, other Marines, Ray can't tell. They exit the Fire Control station and weave through the matter cannon apparatus back toward the main door. Just as they arrive, Nomar comes springing through the gap between door and seal, followed almost immediately by Becker. The Chief is breathing hard, his face crimson and he's missed the bottom button on his tunic so that his collar is uneven.

Ray doesn't give him a chance to start asking questions. He doesn't have time to bring Becker up to speed in detail, which he knows is exactly what the Security Chief would want.

He says, "You know that thing we decided wasn't happening? Looks like we were wrong."

Becker gulps a breath. "A *shed*?"

"Took out your entire security team on this deck, save Mr. Diggs here, and has taken off for parts unknown. Kilgore, Rodriguez and I are going to hunt it down. You and Bobby are going to handle this deck and coordinate our movements as necessary. Notify security to seal off access to Pi and Sigma and any other decks about which I may contact you in the near future. I am the last person to tell anyone else how to do their job, but I'd strongly recommend that you get some reinforcements and some illumination down here as soon as humanly possibly and secure your perimeter."

Though he didn't know how much that sort of thing would help. Probably just give any random *sheds* strolling the deck more buffet options.

Becker snaps back, "Do you even know what tonight is?"

"I understand your coverage is thin because of crowd control."

"Thin? I've got every sec-o on the ship on duty already just to keep the crew from committing rape with drunken female passengers desperate to be seduced before they hit the couches."

Ray only shrugs. "Then call out the Marines. I don't care how you handle it, but I need something resembling a command post here and I need something resembling a deck evacuation below or I strongly suspect you're going to find a large portion of your crew has gone missing come morning."

Becker scrubs savagely at his cheeks, a man on the edge of a migraine. "It's going to take me a few minutes to get my people rounded up. Half an hour to have a command post up and running."

Ray takes two steps to his left and kicks the top off a footlocker. He digs around for a few moments and comes up with a portable comm unit like the ones he, Kilgore and Rodriguez are wearing. He pitches it at Becker.

"We're on channel twelve, scrambled on Code Bravo. Diggs can give you the codes so you can listen in. Don't pollute our channel unless we ask for guidance or we're obviously about to do something amazingly stupid, clear?"

Becker nods. He's already plugging into the comm unit.

Ray edges toward the door, pushing Kilgore and Rodriguez out into the gangway. "No surprises, Rich. We're going to more than likely put some holes in your bulkheads, and I don't want to worry about leaving matching sets in security. Just keep your people out of the way. I'll call if we need help."

"And if you can't handle it?"

"Then I hope you've got Jack Holcomb on speed dial and that he's got a decent backup plan."

"How did this happen, Marlowe? He *failed*. He tried and he failed. We agreed on that."

"I don't know. Maybe he tried again. Maybe we didn't understand nearly as well as we believed we did. There aren't any easy answers."

The Chief looks as if he's going to be ill. "I'll shake the captain out of bed."

"Good idea."

Flashlights, Ray thinks as they plunge through the shadows of Sub-Deck Omicron. Flashlights would have been a good idea. The gangways are mostly dark; not Indiana midnight dark with a sprinkling of stars and the broad swath of the Milky Way scrolled across the sky's meridian like a banner, but cave dark, trapped inside a relative-to-distance paper thin tin can against the void and crushing vacuum of space variety of dark. They should be sprinting for the ladders at the aft blast walls, but instead they're jogging, squinting into the darkness for glints of light against the raised lip of pressure bulkhead doors, depending on Nomar and the red glimmer of his eyes just ahead of them. When he reaches an obstruction, he slows, turns so they can see him and feel their way through the door. Then it's madly on again, jostling one another in the oppressive, almost tactile darkness.

Every once in a while, they come across a fluorescent pool, the light guttering, coloring their skin a haunted blue tint as though they were already corpses and just hadn't realized it yet. While the light lasted, they'd break out into a dead run, dashing as far as it carried them and a short way beyond. Certifiably insane was what it was.

But that's also all it is--just insane. He keeps waiting for the terror to kick in, for his hands to start shaking and the numbing paralysis of fear to lock his joints and drive him into hyperventilation. For Kilgore and Rodriguez, it's just another live fire exercise or another combat mission in which they're not certain about the armament level of their opponent. For all they know, all they've been told, their opponent is still just a fantasy, a wholly human monster wrapped in a bogeyman costume like an actor in the movies. Ray has seen the *shed*.

He should know better than to be going after it, definitely better than to chase after with anything other than his heart hammering and his pulse throbbing in his throat and his thoughts a gyre of approaching panic.

Definitely insane.

Rodriguez asks the question Ray has been avoiding. "What are we supposed to do if we actually corner this thing? We can't just shoot it to death."

"I'm operating under the assumption that in my previous encounter I managed to miss."

"On full automatic? You're very optimistic."

"There were lots of targets. It's possible."

The truth is that the weight of the subby and the load harness makes him feel better, even if they are completely ineffective.

"But it can't touch us as long as we've got these rings on, right?" Kilgore says, breathing hard. "I mean, that's why you gave them to us."

"Colonel Holcomb has offered every assurance that they work."

"Great."

Rodriguez seems to be the only one amused. "Think of it as a field test for new equipment, sergeant."

"According to the most recent statistics, corporal, outside the New Mes combat zone, more Marines are killed field testing experimental equipment in training exercises each year than in all other military related activities combined. Just something for you to file away for later review."

They leave it there, not because there isn't more to say, but because they don't have the breath to waste on standard Marine smack. Finally, after what seems like years, they reach the L-shaped end of the gangway they've been traveling and split right down the rear corridor. What Ray estimates to be a hundred meters distant, there is a column of sharp, steady illumination spearing up from the floor. They race for it, and spread out around the tip of the ladder, like peering down into a well.

Ray gets on the comm. "Becker."

"I'm here."

"I'm looking down a shaft into what appears to be Sub-deck Pi. Judging from the fact that it's completely lit and I don't hear the distinct echo of bloody screams, I'm guessing that our boy has decided to shoot for Sigma. Where is that ladder?"

A muttered conference with Diggs follows, then: "It's about ten meters to your left, Ray. You should be able to see it from where you are."

But he can't, of course. Because the lights aren't working there.

Becker goes on, "Are you sure the *shed* has left this level?"

"Confirm that. He's gone down."

"You're certain?"

Um, yeah.

"I need to know if it's gone to Sigma, Ray."

"It's gone to Sigma."

Becker goes silent for several moments, then says, "Sub-deck Sigma is the primary resource deck for particle reactor maintenance. I can't raise anyone on that level, at least not with this unit. They're lead shielded and the signal keeps bouncing. Diggs is at the checkpoint trying on the hard comm, but I haven't heard back from him yet."

"We're going to proceed."

"Ray, what I'm telling you is that I can't pull all those people out. We're in the deceleration protocol. They can't just abandon the reactor and hope for the best. They can't shut it down until you get this situation mopped up because we'd lose braking and overshoot our docking lane. If we can get through to them, we can clear out the non-essential personnel, but there will still be a couple hundred hands that simply can't evacuate. Not without endangering the ship."

In the glow of the shaft, the three of them exchange pained looks.

"I copy, Chief. I'll let you know the situation when we hit Sigma."

Kilgore shakes his head. "I've had better news. A deck loaded with non-combatants is going to seriously complicate the firing lanes."

"Good thing we expect the weapons to be largely ineffective, then," Rodriguez responds, shrugging.

At least someone is still being optimistic. Urging Nomar ahead of them with his foot, Ray edges back the way they have come, toward the purported location of the ladder down to Sigma. He feels his way along the wall, fingers and toes probing so he doesn't make an inadvertent plummet and break his neck on the deckplate two levels down. There, he waits for Kilgore and Rodriguez to crowd in behind him, then slings his subby over his shoulder for the descent. He would like to go slowly, rung by rung, but two steps down, it becomes clear that the ladder is encased in a steel tube that acts like an amplifier each time he plants his foot. That's no good at all.

Into his pickups, he whispers: "Fireman's slide. Count to five, then follow."

That's hands on the outside of the ladder, gripping loosely so the fingers don't get tangled in the rungs and the insides of his bootheels providing his primary hold. Only slightly less dangerous than a straight belly flop into the shaft. With his head at floor level, Ray glances at Nomar's glowing eyes and pats his shoulder. Nomar leaps on and digs into the fabric of his shirt with his paws.

"Be ready to jump free," Ray says to him, and Nomar nods his understanding.

A second later, he's practically in free fall, keeping his fingers splayed and imagining how they'd snap if he folded them in toward the rungs. For a brief instant, it occurs to him that the only problem with this plan is that he can't see the deck below him--he doesn't know when to squeeze his feet against the ladder for adequate braking and Kilgore is going to be on his way down before he has a chance to work it out.

Then his boots smack the deck full on, and a glare of pain shoots up from shins to hips like he's decided to compress the entire length of his spine into a few dense centimeters. He utters a hoarse, unintelligible bark and bowls backward, landing hard on his ass. At once, Kilgore arrives with much the same grace, tumbles and lands on top of him. The impact drives Ray's head against the deck and strikes out the darkness that had filled his vision with a blot of agonizing white. He waits for Rodriguez to duplicate the maneuver, braces himself for the blow of an extra few dozen kilograms, because that's the way Marines work. Togetherness, camaraderie and all that business.

But Rodriguez is there a few moments later, not tumbling, but helping Kilgore to his feet as the sergeant groans and curses.

He finds Ray's hand in the dark and pulls him to his feet. "Always be the last guy down a dark hole," he says. "Gives you a chance to count the seconds before impact. To estimate distance for braking, you know?"

Kilgore: "Smartass."

Ray hardly hears them. He's too busy realizing that they finally have light. Not much, granted, not enough to filter very effectively up the ladder shaft, but enough that he can see. They're in a rounded alcove against the blast wall, looking out on a corridor almost exactly like the one they left up on Omicron. It's a straight chute in either direction, with the occasional intersection splitting off in the distance. Not so many as above, because most of this area is a warren of offices, multiply redundant computer systems and monitoring laboratories. The lighting is still dim here. More than half of the bulbs have blown, and those that haven't blown are sputtering.

From what seems to be kilometers away, there is screaming. High pitched, ringing with terror, choking to silence.

"Where is it coming from?" Kilgore growls.

Ray strains to listen, but there are bulkheads and strange echoes, any number of distorting baffles between them. He steps out into the corridor, where there are bodies. Some are puddles of flesh, things he's seen before. Others are shattered wrecks, as though they've been smashed by hammers the size of tree trunks. The flesh is mangled, battered, stretched by bones which have poked through the skin. The walls are streaked with blood, angry red flowers from impact points where corpses flopped like tossed dolls and languid, wavy arcs from crewmen who slid lazily from wall to deck. Ray counts a dozen before he stops.

He keeps himself from panic, from sounding panicked. "Becker, I need orientation on this deck."

"What do you see?"

A bunch of dead guys.

"I just climbed off the ladder. It seems to be cognate to the ladder position on Omicron." First things first, he thinks. "You'd better direct me to the reactor control room to start. We'll want to confirm that they're still operating and warn them about trouble. How close are your guys?"

"They're on the way. Two or three minutes at most, but the lifts are jammed with passengers shuttling between parties."

Good for them.

Kilgore grunts. "You might tell them to hurry, Chief, or they won't have anyone left to rescue."

"What?" It's as close to screaming as Becker is likely to get.

Ray glares at Kilgore, makes a slicing motion across his neck. Cut it out. "We've got a few casualties," he says carefully. "Give me some direction to Reactor Control."

A few maddening moments pass, and Ray imagines Becker sifting through the graphical schematics on the checkpoint's terminal. "Turn right down the main corridor off the ladder. Take the first gangway on your left and go about halfway down. That entire gangway is lead shielded and the walls are about two meters thick, so all the doors on your left should be deeply recessed. It's Section 44, but you should know it when you see it. It'll have a sign."

"Copy that."

"And Ray? If you get lost, just follow the markings on the wall."

Ray executes a sharp turn back toward the alcove. Along the blast wall are dabbed a series of straight lines of assorted colors that stretch in both directions down the length of the corridor. The green line is broken by the words Crew Quarters. Red by Primary Reactor Control. Particle Research Laboratory #1. Security Checkpoint. And so on. Leave it to engineers, he thinks, to suck the mystery right out of a situation.

From the interminable distance, there is a scream--long, wailing, guttering to silence like a torch in the rain. It brings Kilgore and Rodriguez out into the hall with their weapons pressed butt to shoulder, sighting along the barrel for targets.

Ray counts out their objectives a finger at a time, just to make sure they're clear. "First we check on reactor control. Then we eliminate the *shed*. Last we help the survivors. I'm on point; the two of you are wing and cover fire." Their roles were perfectly obvious, but Ray covers the terrain anyway. It is what they all expect. "You see the *shed*, start unloading on him. It probably won't hurt him, but at least it will get his attention, and maybe keep him from devoting so much attention to the deck crew."

Kilgore and Rodriguez exchange a look that says *And then what?* but they have enough discipline not to voice it.

They set off with Nomar running ahead of them; not exactly double time, but close to it. Their boots rap against the deck, their weapons jangle in the load harnesses. In his ear, Ray can hear their shallow, rapid breathing. And at last, there's a small, chilled ball of fear coalescing in his stomach. Just enough to pop the beads of sweat out on his forehead and make him feel pale all over, like his blood is retreating from his limbs, finding a safer place to hide than his extremities.

They follow the red line to where it ends in a neat little circle like a period opposite an intersection with a fore-aft running gangway. Ray hugs the wall and holds up his fist as a signal for the others to stop. At the corner, he can see the red line take up again down this way, just like Becker said. Deep breath with his back against the wall, then he lunges into gangway, weapon raised to his shoulder, swinging the barrel back and forth over the passage in regular, metronomic sweeps.

Nothing. Not even bodies.

Ray keeps his subby trained with one hand and waves Kilgore on with the other. Kilgore dashes across the open space and takes a crouched position against the far wall. After a moment, he announces that the corridor is clear. Rodriguez springs between them and begins the advance. Nomar takes off after him. It's very fast after that, a sort of sinuous progression where they're not really running, not really walking, weaving the barrels of their rifles over every square inch of wall, deck, doorway, the entire world viewed through the tight

triangle of their sights.

The door to Section 44 is a massively thick steel slab jammed into the wall, computer moderated and locked by a punchkey driven interface attached just inside the lintel. At eye level is a pane of plastisheen, just large enough to show you the pupils and nasal bridge of anyone who might be standing on the other side. Immediately to the right is the bulge of a pressure bulkhead with its ovaline door hanging open on its hinges. It makes Ray feel claustrophobic, like they've darted into a corner.

The door to Primary Reactor Control is still sealed, locked, so Ray leaves Kilgore and Rodriguez to threaten the gangway and he peers in through the plastisheen port. He sees bright lights, a dizzying array of panels, gauges, workstations. All the displays are lit a cheery and reassuring green. What they would call in the Marines *five by five, green across*, which should be a relief to him. The Van Nuys reactor isn't melting down to add yet another trouble to their list of calamities.

Except he can't actually see anybody busily engaged in the task of keeping it from melting down. The workstations he can glimpse through the brief window are empty. There aren't gaggles of engineers wandering back and forth doing engineering sorts of things, and maybe that's okay. Maybe the real work is done deeper in, beyond Ray's line of sight. Maybe they run a skeleton crew on what would be the night shift, or even more likely on a night like tonight when most of the ship is engaged in drunken revelry and outright debauch.

But Becker has already told him that the reactor crew wouldn't abandon their stations for such a minor inconvenience as a rampaging *shed*, which was theoretically somewhere up the risk scale from Missing the Biggest Party of the Voyage.

On the other hand, there are no shattered bodies littering the floor inside. All the equipment seems to be working. No one is slowly wailing out their last gasps of life.

Is there a possible permutation of facts which would make the absence of corpses somehow worse than their presence?

Ray pounds his fist against the door. Tries it again a few seconds later. He receives no response, then notices that the keypad entry system also has a comm button, which might mean that the door is soundproofed and no one can hear him banging away. (Right?) But his assorted calls, cajoleries, outright threats raise not so much as even a go-to-hell salutation from inside.

Ray glances back through the view port for activity and notices a curious thing. Of the status panels he is able to see, two of them have gone yellow. As he watches, the backlit buttons on a third flick from green to amber to a hue that matches the previous two panels.

And no one who seems to care about this oddity wanders into view.

Ray swallows hard. "Becker?"

"I'm here."

His head is spinning a little, the way he felt as a child when his uncle would take him by the arms and swing him around in a circle, then set him down to wander into chairs and table corners. "What's the status of your security team on this level?"

"They should be exiting the main lift as we speak."

"Do you have your command network set up on Omicron?"

"We just patched into the ship systems."

Ray nods, takes another moment to steady his voice. "Do you think you could jump onto the net and find me the code sequence that opens the door to Primary Reactor Control?"

It is Becker's turn to pause. "Sure. Yeah."

"That's good. There doesn't seem to be anyone around to let us in. And I should probably report that the status panels inside seem to be flipping themselves to a disturbing shade of yellow." There, in fact, goes another one.

Peripherally, Ray sees Kilgore and Rodriguez stiffen, as though someone has just poked them with a needle. Ray knows the feeling. He's beginning to feel stiff all over. In the time it takes Becker to come up with the string of digits, and the additional seconds it takes Ray to steady the tremors in his hands and punch them in, two more panels go yellow. The magnetic locks make an audible pop as they release, and with a hum of hydraulics, the door retracts into the wall along hidden runners. The three of them plus Nomar tumble inside. For some reason that Ray can't imagine, Rodriguez thumbs the door closed again and locks it down.

Ray says, "Spread out. See if you can find the engineers."

He needs engineers. He has no idea what it is that he's looking at. Panels, certainly. Hundreds of them. Entire warrens of interlocked workstations, cubicles, monitoring boards. A thousand individual dials and ten thousand rows of buttons, each neatly printed with text that conveys no meaning--engineering jargon that is a language so arcane as to be impenetrable. He wanders inside, and the yellow lights trail after him like a wave, like disaster following on his heels.

Somewhere, he thinks, somewhere around here there has to be a big, red button that just says STOP in great big letters.

But there isn't, not that he can find. Just silence and a space crowded with equipment he doesn't understand, feeling all the more empty because of the people who are supposed to be here understanding it all for him.

Rodriguez shouts, and Ray almost leaps straight out of his pants. But then he's running, retracing his steps through the islands of office space, homing in on the sound of Rodriguez's voice. He arrives in time to see Rodriguez lurching from an enclosure set off against the wall. It is a dense, blocky structure with wide conduits that branch out to each side like spiders' legs and disappear into the wall.

Rodriguez slings himself a few steps free of the room and stops, head down, hands on his knees, his subby hanging off his forearm from its strap. Kilgore arrives just behind Ray, and they stop at Rodriguez's side, forming a rough edged circle.

"I found the engineers," Rodriguez says slowly, still looking at the floor. He jabs a thumb at the room he has just left. "They're in there. All of them, I think."

Without thinking, Ray's mind surveys the enclosure in question, calculates dimensions, converts that to surface area, then volume of a rectangle in cubic feet. Then he holds that figure up against the number of empty workstations he's seen in this vast room and the mental image of the approximate size of your average human being. There is no way he can see to divide the one figure by the other and come up with a reasonable solution for fitting all those people in that bit of space. The numbers just don't work.

But Rodriguez has left the door ajar, so he goes to see.

And the numbers do work after all, but not in any way that could be considered reasonable.

What he thinks about when he looks inside is monkey bread. When he was a boy of eight or ten, his mother discovered a recipe for an interesting confection identified as monkey bread. It was essentially a bland biscuit dish, seasoned with cinnamon and sugar, lathered in butter and a corn syrup, brown sugar paste that made it perfectly, yummiily sticky. To make it, you used the biscuits that came in cans, twisted the dough into interesting, tormented shapes and packed them tightly into a bunt cake pan. After baking and soaking in the brown sugar syrup, what you eventually had was something like a cake, but also like a puzzle. Golden brown breading marbled with sugary veins, so that when you picked a piece out with your fingers, it came out whole, leaving behind a cavity shaped exactly like the bit you had removed.

He had loved it because it was delicious and fun. His mother had loved it because it took all of twenty minutes from biscuit can to cooling on the counter, which made it just about perfect for the endless round of church potlucks and community socials and small town Indiana public gatherings.

Someone else has been making monkey bread. The Guinness record for world's largest monkey bread.

The engineering crew is packed so tightly and in such shapes that the blood has not yet begun to seep out the door, but dribbles down the wall of packed flesh, down twisted arms and swollen faces, across bulging eyelids and ruptured chests into a small and spreading pool at Ray's feet. He licks his lips, sweating from the impossible heat generated by so much compressed mass. Bodies still cooling, as though the slaughter is just minutes old. He can only see because of the light through the open door. They've consumed all the available space and blotted out the ceiling lamps, the desk equipment, whatever else might have been inside. Wall to wall, floor to ceiling monkey bread.

In his ear, Kilgore says: "Commander, I think you should have a look at this. We have a new problem."

Which is okay. Ray wants a new problem. He's more than happy to leave this problem for someone else to disentangle. He steps out of the doorway and glances down at Nomar.

"You don't want to go in there," he says, and closes the door.

Kilgore and Rodriguez have retreated across the control room to a wide, semi-circular panel display. Here the lights have stayed green, indicating that all systems are functioning as advertised, and Ray realizes it's because this is one of the few stations that doesn't have business with the reactor itself. It's a security and monitoring pod. Mounted above the racks of keypads and switches, tape drives and humming hard disks, are a dozen closed-circuit monitor screens. Most of them are tuned to the assorted hatches and bulkheads and sealed doors leading to sensitive portions of the deck. All of these scenes are silent, bizarre, disaster movie stuff. Scores of crumpled bodies in various poses of sudden, arresting death. Lying in gangways like they simply fell over, had the wick of their lives snuffed in a matter of seconds. Legs jutting from open doors. Limp forms flat on their faces with a spill of clipboards or hand held computers fanned around them as though they have been caught tripping over their own feet.

Kilgore calls Ray's attention away from the general nightmare by tapping one of the screens. "Look at this." Then he points to another. "And this. And this one, too. See if you can explain it to me."

He recognizes the composition of the image by theory rather than fact. It's one of those things only the ship's designers see in actuality, before the cone is sealed and the venting tubes attached and the cooling tanks pumped full of distilled water. It's the inside of *Paraclete's* Van Nuys reactor. He doesn't really understand how it works, but he recognizes the tree trunk sized plutonium enriched rods suspended over quicksilver domes that serve as their contact points. From this angle, he can see just a glimpse of the finely bored circumference chamber, the particle super-accelerator which bombards the rods and the contacts with a withering stream of atomic-fusion fuel.

Three cameras. Three chambers full of rods, only two of which are kept on-line at any given time while the third is brought down on a rotating schedule for maintenance by an army of reactor drones. But all three are functioning now, stabbing blue strobes of lighting between rods and contacts. The fierce bursts of electrical energy scour the chambers, scorching the pale, gray walls with blackened scars.

And in each chamber, each image, a *shed*, a gleaming ebony titan, impossibly tall and broad. Clean limbed and stone solid like the statue of an ancient Egyptian pharaoh. They grit their teeth, each molar and canine and bicuspid taller than a man, retract their lips into snarls, strain their arms against the sky with their feet spread shoulder width apart. And in their hands are the steel cages upon which the rods hang, creating perfectly symmetrical triangles between legs and pelvis, arms and shoulders. With bulging muscle and neck cords straining, they draw the cages down against the mechanical resistance of a hundred failsafe systems and industrial servomotors. The tips of the rods edging toward the contact plates glow red, then orange, then white. And Ray imagines that at any moment, he'll be able to hear the grinding of gears and stripping of flywheels as the servomotors fail.

After that, he can't even put an image to the catastrophic events that would follow.

But Ray is stirred by the most obvious dissonance from expectation. He says, "There are three."

It's stupid, senseless, impossible. Not one, summoned by the ritual murder of Micah Uytendehaage, but three. Three *shed*. Impossible.

Kilgore says, "You didn't tell us they were so big."

Ray responds absently, "I don't remember them being so big. Big, yes. But not that big."

"That's like thirty meters, rough guess without something to scale against."

But Ray doesn't answer, just bores his gaze into the monitor. He might stare at them all night, the experience safely mediated by lens and camera and a kilometer of cable and insulting electronics--heedless of the fact that they were doing more now than just ramming the engineering crew into satanic culinary designs, heedless of the fact that there wasn't just one wandering aimlessly about the sub-deck architecture anymore or even heedless that they were in a place where they should not be, could not be, an insanely and instantly lethal environment. It simply boggled comprehension.

Then the panels around him, even the security panels, dash from green or yellow to red. Blinding red, like little glares of malice. And immediately behind the light is a resonant, assaulting buzz of Klaxons. Pause, buzz, pause, buzz, stirringly reminiscent of the staccato fire alarm bursts his elementary school had used for tornado drills.

That alarm must have lit up every terminal on the ship's network, because he's immediately got Becker screaming in his ear.

"What is going on down there, Marlowe?"

Apparently he's not the only one who finds the blat of the Klaxons a bit unnerving.

"Tell me you've got more engineers to run the reactor, Becker." Though he isn't certain exactly what engineers could do to resolve this particular malfunction. It more than likely was not the sort of scenario they covered in school.

"All of the engineers are on that deck," Becker rumbles.

"Then all of the engineers appear to be dead. And the *shed* have infiltrated the reactor cores. I'm way out of my depth here, Chief." In the absence of something constructive, he does what he can do, which is to get Becker's sub-network id and patch the images from the security station straight to the remote terminals on Omicron. It's the only way he knows to make Becker understand. He's greeted in return with a barrage of silence.

After a time, seconds that feel like months: "They're trying to destroy the ship."

Ray wonders suddenly if this was what had happened to the *Hegemony*, *Asp*, *Gorgon*. *Shed* in the reactor cores. What would they have made of such a thing?

And would they have had Frederick Whiston to blame?

Frederick Whiston, murderer, summoner of *shed*, Lilaiken. He experiences a brief stab in his chest like guilt, like grief. What else had he missed? How much of this could have been prevented if he'd been less concerned about sparing Emma's feelings and Becker's sense of propriety than about doing his job in the first place?

Hunting down Lilaikens and killing them, *that* was what he was supposed to be doing. Everything else was a diversion, a complication. And how could the CIU have missed a connection so egregious as one between a Whiston and the Lilaikens? And what was Frederick trying to accomplish? If the murder of Micah Uytdehaage had been a message of some sort, what had the content of that message been? And what had changed in the interim that had required that this final, irrevocable step be taken?

Too many questions. Not enough time.

How he may have failed, how the whole CIU may have failed can be talked to death in the future. It does not change the fact of the *shed*.

"I need a list of options," Ray says. He doesn't have to shout for Becker to hear him because the pickups against his throat pull the vibration straight from his vocal cords, but he shouts anyway. Someone should be panicking over this, even if Ray has to forcibly kick them through awe and confusion and disbelief to get them there.

There's a muted beep on the line, a signal which indicates another remote comm unit has popped onto their secure channel.

"Good evening, gentlemen. Nice of you to invite me to your party."

It's Commander Sorensen, ever unflappable, at least if the vigor and calm in his tone are to be believed. Ray formulates a distinct mental image of Sorensen standing at the guest comm in the Officers Lounge wearing his dress blues, sparkling with gold braid and chest full of medals. The most pressing issue on his attention is the fact that his steak is getting cold and his Lodola Nuova Chianti, warm.

Yet another officer not prone to mind-jittering panic.

"I've been monitoring your situation from here, Mr. Marlowe--" Which Ray thinks must be difficult given that the Officers Lounge didn't seem to have had a handy ship's net terminal when he was there, but he lets it pass. "--and I've dispatched engineers from alternate sections to your location. They're not the best choice, but at least they present more expertise than is currently present. I'd like to recommend that your squad link up with Chief Becker's security detail and prepare to defend those assets once their work begins."

Becker pipes in. "I'll instruct my guys to leave an escort at the lift. Ray, the security team leader on your level

reports they're finding no targets, no human assists on their sweep. They should be in your vicinity in two minutes."

"We'll put out the mat for them." He doesn't have to say anything. Rodriguez and Kilgore nod and march off to the door to greet the new arrivals. "Any idea what these engineers are going to do when they get here?"

Sorensen clears his throat. It's a painful sound, labored. "I'm going to have them flood the cores."

"Sir?"

"It's strictly an emergency measure. A last ditch measure at that. The water in the cooling tanks is heavily impregnated with an isotope that will prevent the further heating of the rods. It will effectively kill the reactors until the pressure vessels can be drained and cleaned."

"Which will leave us dead in the water," Ray says.

"We can live off stored power for several weeks if we shut down non-essential systems." Sorensen has obviously been over the complete catalog of consequences. "Without the Van Nuys' to power the deceleration thrusters, we're going to shoot right past New Holyoke, certainly, but I have hope that the EED outpost will be able to mount a rescue operation or, if necessary, tow us back to port for refit. The resulting delay should give us time to--um--clean up this unexpected problem with the drive mechanics. That, of course, will be your responsibility, Mr. Marlowe."

Ray supposes that it's a decent enough plan, even if a tad given over to apocalyptic inclinations for his tastes. Downside, of course, is that even if they don't manage to explode, they'll still have three *shed* to contend with, only then they'll be hunted *and* trapped *and* without any reasonable method for escape off the ship short of the emergency pods.

He hears the door retract and is aware that Kilgore and Rodriguez have moved out into the gangway. He glances over to assure himself that they're coving both flanks, even though it has occurred to him that they're using the equivalent of potato guns against armored personnel carriers, here. He can't take his eyes off the trinity of screens reflecting the *shed*. Where had they come from? And how was Ray supposed to get *to* them if they could lurk in places like the reactor core? It was a tactical nightmare. But he isn't even thinking tactics now; he's just watching the pure, undiluted power of the *shed* in action. It's as close as he's ever been to legitimate, religious awe. The years since Ba'dai, the veil of time, seems to strip away, and he's back for a moment in a dry and thirsty land, in a cavern like a crypt with blood and cordite in his nose and the cool, firm touch of the *shed* upon his forehead.

And it seems that the *shed* he is watching turn their heads in unison, that they pinpoint the cameras by which he observes them. Their eyes, pools of darkness, contract, and no longer is it Ray tracking them, but the *shed* tracking Ray as if the screens have become a two way portal, a mirror of Galadriel, and should he reach out with trembling fingers in this moment and touch the images, he would be sucked into their place, into the core with them like stepping fresh into an alien dimension.

Limned in lightning and the flickering bombardment of particle matter, straining against the mechanical soul and thew and bone of *Paraclete* itself, they are aware of him. Him, Ray Marlowe.

I think that we shall meet again.

Into his mind, a thought springs: Four. There are four. Four.

Like a litany, a koan, a chant, and for the space of a split second, it fills him and he imagines that he reads the

words from the lips of the *shed* themselves.

His eyes drop from the core monitors to another image projected on a screen to his far left. This is a telescopic view of an anonymous gangway through which move the gray forms of men, advancing in double time, wrapped in the uniforms of ship security. Becker's men, he realizes. Along the wall runs a fat red stripe with arrows spurring them forward, quickening them with purpose. But it isn't purpose that they need. They're already driven by a scourge, a nine-tailed whip jagged with grains of desert sand and the bones of men.

Four. There are four.

Like a shadow among them, the *shed* moves. Comes. Pushes them on.

The *shed* in the core seem to laugh.

Ray springs for the door, screaming. "Down! Down! Down! Incoming fire!"

"Say again?" Rodriguez responds, more curious than alarmed.

Just as the shooting starts.

A flurry of small explosions at first, then the high-pitched wail and ping of bullets deflected off the deck and the bulkhead right outside. Loud even over the blat of the reactor Klaxons. Rounding the corner toward the door, Ray arrives in time to see Rodriguez tumble back through the opening, flat on his back. Kilgore follows an instant later, falling on top of him, grunting, furious, shouting along the comm net.

"I'm hit! I'm hit! Goddamned sec-o motherfucker shot me!"

Instantly, Becker: "What the fuck?"

Rodriguez: "Chief, tell your men to stop shooting at us."

A voice Ray doesn't recognize, some security officer: "Detail One, Detail One! Cease fire! I repeat, cease fire! You're firing on your contact team!"

Becker again: "They're not answering, Shaw. Who's heading up that team?"

A dozen more voices, interlaced and overlapped, chasing threads Ray doesn't have time to parse for meaning.

He scuds to a halt at the open door, unsuccessfully attempting to avoid stomping on Kilgore and Rodriguez as they disentangle themselves. Kilgore's ankle is a mess, leaking blood across the deck. Ray moves past them, pops his head out into the gangway, using the bulkhead outside for cover, then slipping into the corridor, back against the wall, keeping the bulge in the wall between himself and the advancing detail. A barrage of bullets spang off the deck, the ceiling, wildly aimed as the security team advances at a dead run.

He waits for the gap between fire, kicks his rifle against his shoulder and swings out. Three round burst, center of mass. He drops the two lead men and they don't so much fall as they seem to hit a slab of stone, sprawl backward, knocking others off their stride. Ray counts either nine or twelve men advancing, then dodges back out of the field of fire again.

He takes a breath, collects the chatter of voices in his ear again.

Shaw still trying to coordinate with the detail's team leader.

Kilgore's almost constant stream of curses.

A weird, binaural echo, what he realizes is the voice of the team leader himself, heard both over the comm net and echoed down the gangway: "Security Command! Confirmed hostile contact with Lilaiken agents on Sub-deck Sigma! They have returned fire. Repeat, they are firing on our position. Request you dispatch lift escort to move up this corridor from the opposite side."

A blistering response from Becker, Shaw: "Lieutenant Vajda, you are *not* encountering hostile agents! That's your goddamned contact team! Cease fire!"

"They've just killed Faherty and Genova, sir. That seems pretty damned hostile to me."

Kilgore: "You fired at us first, stupid motherfucker!"

Becker: "Stand down, Lieutenant." Then, off-microphone: "Can we kill those alarms remotely? I don't think they're hearing us!"

Vajda: "Confirmed order to eliminate Lilaiken agents, Chief. We're moving in."

Becker, Shaw, a dozen others: "What?"

Rodriguez dives across the gangway, eliciting a withering stream of fire. He rolls up against the wall opposite Ray and folds himself into a crouched firing stance. They make eye contact and Rodriguez flashes him a hand signal--points at his ear, shows three fingers. Ray switches his comm to channel three. It's a blessedly silent net.

Voice low so it doesn't echo down the gangway, Rodriguez says, "What do you want us to do?"

"Make them stop shooting at us."

Rodriguez blinks at him. "I don't want to kill sec-os."

"They want to kill you, corporal. Or haven't you figured that out yet?" Ray ducks his head to see what's happening down the gangway. He pulls off a half dozen rounds at a pair of sec-os racing for cover. One goes down, clutching his stomach. The second seems to stumble. A small, red hole appears in the center of his forehead and he flops to the deck, face down. Most of the back of his skull is missing.

That's it for the easy targets. The rest of Lieutenant Vajda's detail has clustered into recessed doorways to the left or kicked in doors on the right. Ray eases back and lets them spatter the other side of the pressure bulkhead with angry fire.

Rodriguez stares at him, eyes wide, but Ray just shakes his head. "We've got hostiles in the bay behind you. I don't know if those are contained or if they've got outlets farther down this hall. If you don't want to defend this angle, at least cover that one so they don't sneak up on me."

"I've got this side," Kilgore rumbles. He's planted himself in the doorway with his bloodied ankle propped against the wall inside the door. He trains his subby down the gangway like a man greedy for targets.

"What's going on?" Rodriguez pleads.

Four. There are four.

It's too much to explain over the hail of gunfire. Ray simply says, "*Shed*."

Except he hasn't seen it since he left the security station. The *shed* has vanished.

He flips back to the command net, is immediately deafened by the cacophony of frenzied exchanges.

Becker: "Lift team, say again?"

A breathless voice, young, on the verge of panic. "Sir, I'm confirming your intel that more Lilaiken agents are on their way. We'll engage at the lift."

"Do not engage, Mr. Schmidt! That's our engineering team on the way."

"Yes, sir. We will use every caution."

"Are you listening to me?" A cluster of obscenities. "Marlowe!"

Ray points at his comm for Rodriguez and indicates he should switch channels. "I'm here, Becker."

"Do you want to tell me what's going on?"

"I don't have time. Rodriguez, cover the gangway."

Rodriguez does as he's told, sniping off a dozen quick rounds. Ray can't tell if he has hit anything, or just means to keep them honest.

"My security details seem to behaving trouble understanding their orders."

"That would be another *shed* feeding them disinformation."

"Fuck! The lift team is determined to wipe out the engineers, Marlowe. They're already on the way and without comm to take redirection. They're walking right into an ambush."

Ray understands what he's saying. "We'll make an attempt to collect them, but I don't know that we can get there in time. The first detail has dug in."

Becker pauses, and Ray assumes he's conferring with Sorensen on another channel. It's Sorensen who responds, his voice tight for the first time. "Mr. Marlowe, a reactor incident is imminent. We've got to have those engineers in place very shortly."

"Copy. We'll do our best."

"I need better than that. I need results."

Behind him, Kilgore shouts, "Door!" He blasts away on full automatic, stitching lead in a line along the wall ten meters down the gangway.

Instantly, the security detail on the other side erupts with supporting fire. For an instant, Ray can actually see the sonic trail of a dense stream of bullets zipping past. He hears them like wasps buzzing against his ear. A sharp and stinging lance of fire strikes his left arm. It barely registers, but he dutifully probes the bicep for injury. There's a hole in his sleeve, and his fingers come away bloody, but it's just a groove carved into the muscle. A lucky ricochet.

He goes low, jerks into the open and empties the remaining rounds in his clip. The sec-os have taken pretty good cover, so it's all headshots. He can't tell if he managed to hit anyone at all.

Kilgore slaps a fresh clip into his subby and continues to fire down the gangway. "Confirm three kills, Commander. Can't tell if there are any more. Bunch of dumbasses."

"On three, on three," Ray barks in response and switches comm channels again. He has to raise his voice to be heard over the alarms and yet another barrage. "Becker needs us to get the engineers. We've got to move."

Kilgore snorts. "Easy for him to say."

"They're down to five by my count, so it isn't as bad as it could be. Kilgore, give me suppressing fire on five. Rodriguez flank right; I'll flank left. We go at a dead run. Are we clear?"

"That plan sucks," Kilgore announces.

"It only sucks if you shoot us in the back."

"It sucks because you're leaving me here."

"We'll be back. And Nomar will stay with you."

Kilgore rolls his eyes. "That's great. Great! Really." But he's moving even as he says it, dragging his gimpy leg off the wall and flopping sideways onto his belly so he can fire ahead of them. "I'll give you this clip in advance, Commander. Go while I load."

Ray makes eye contact with Rodriguez, wonders if his eyes look as wide and fearful as the corporal's. "My lead, your follow."

Rodriguez nods, quick and sharp. Kilgore opens up for seven full, deafening seconds. Distinctly, Ray hears the hammer of his rifle click on an empty chamber. Then he's crazy, flat out of his mind, resisting ten billion years of evolution by plunging from cover and racing through the pressure door into a gangway that is suddenly claustrophobic. The walls close in on him, and he's a massive, lumbering target moving at a turtle's pace, a snail's pace. So big and slow and stupid a blind three year old could plunk him a dozen times between here and there. It takes a century to slog the ten meters to the corpse of the sec-o he killed with the headshot. A millennium more reach the man writhing with the gut wound. An eternity later, he's at the first recessed doorway with Rodriguez a step behind.

And the idiot sec-os there take all that time and just a second more to get their rifles around, aimed back the way Ray has just come. One second, four eyes as big as dinner plates, two mouths ragged circles of surprise. Ray squeezes the trigger on his subby and they jerk and jerk and jerk forever, penetrated by lead, blossoming rosebuds across their chests. One of them is Lieutenant Vajda, whose voice he has heard on the comm net. The other is a wiry sergeant with a diamond stud in his ear. Ray has stood next to him in the bathroom down near his old berth, shaving in front of the mirror, talking crewmen smack about the latest baseball scores. The guy was a Yankees fan.

He keeps running.

A splash of color to his right, Rodriguez's side, then an explosion of crimson, a sprinkler's trail of blood sprayed against the wall and he's past it.

Two, one. There's still one left!

And a black gun barrel with a bore the size of a howitzer, right in his face. A muzzle flash a kilometer long. A stitch along the side of his head. Burnt powder in his nose, liquid warmth over his ear, down his cheek. Fire, fire, fire! A boneless, rag doll flop and skitter of rifle across the deck.

And it's over.

Ray hits the intersection at the end of the gangway and pulls up, reloads, reconnoiters before going on. In a voice as heavy as his whole body, he reports, "Gangway is clear, Sergeant Kilgore. Hold down the fort."

He doesn't look back at the wreckage behind him.

For the record, that plan did, in fact, suck.

Rodriguez points to the wall opposite them where there's a green line with an arrow pointing left and the word LIFTS.

"We're proceeding to the lift," Ray says.

"Don't take all day about it," Kilgore mutters. Then, louder: "I'll coordinate with the honchos on channel twelve. Keep me informed."

Ray glances over to Rodriguez, cracks a smile that feels that feels both forced and crazy. "Are you ready for this?"

To his relief, Rodriguez is cool, his jaw set. The eyes are a little wide, a little frenzied, but that's a small thing in the grand scheme, for a man who has just killed his own shipmates. He jacks a new clip into his subby and snaps a round into the chamber. "Aye, aye, Commander."

"Let's go."

And they race off, chasing the green line down a wider gangway, through half a dozen bulkheads, pressure doors and intersections. Ray keeps imagining as his heels strike the deckplate that he hears gunshots, the crackle of a subby on full automatic and the tink of high-velocity shells against the inside of the express lift, the hollow scream of engineers dragged out of bed and in front of an impromptu firing squad. It urges him into an extra burst of speed.

Finally, they skid into a wide corridor where the outside wall curves against the outer hull. He figures they're roughly below the matter cannon placements now, less than sixty seconds from the main lift access. Bodies here, lots of them, strung out in shattered poses like they were felled by a sudden, hurricane wind. The deck is slick with blood, so he shortens his stride, dances on the tips of his toes, leaps carcasses like hurdles. It isn't easy going anymore. Most of the lights here have blown, so it's just like Omicron again; a wild plunge through the dark. But that just means he can see the glow of the lifts better, the sec-os with their flashlights out and their firing positions set as he and Rodriguez streak around the last curve.

Ray shouts at them.

The lift makes an audible ping as it arrives.

The doors hum and spring open, cutting the darkness with a brilliant rectangular blade.

From somewhere, everywhere, shadows Ray can't penetrate, the deep and mighty voice of the *shed*.

Kiri-ya! Kiri-ya! Umbra fatan tecola, Kiri! Ya!

The sec-os' weapons erupt without warning, spitting tongues of fire in the dark. Ray counts three, four muzzles, but he doesn't stop. He doesn't set himself, just thumbs his rifle to automatic as he did once, long ago, at Ba'dai and begins to spray. Phosphorous tracers dart wildly down the corridor, plinking against the walls, tracing the hull's angle like marbles caught in a centrifuge. He's partially flash blinded when Rodriguez opens up beside him and jerks his head away by reflex.

One by one, the muzzle flashes tilt up and waver, dance in a dozen directions, most of which end up directed at the ceiling. Ray can't see if they're moving, can't hear if they're groaning. He's got the echo of rifle fire ringing in his ears, so he slows a few meters short of the lift. Cautious advance, he thinks. Rifle to shoulder, scan in small circles for movement, for potential targets. It's pointless. All he can see is the red pulse of the headache he's going to have later; all he can hear is the sort of muffled, cavernous thump of his own breathing.

"Hail the lift!" he says, and he thinks he may be shouting. "We're here to retrieve you!"

But no one moves; nothing seems to be moving at all.

A small, tinny voice. Rodriguez, he supposes. "I'll sweep the lift."

"Go."

Rodriguez darts behind him, then steers to the right and disappears into the swath of light.

No more enemies. No sec-os. But where is the *shed*?

He feels wild now, springing from side to side and jerking his rifle at every shadow that seems prone to movement. No good. The darkness seems to swirl like a polluted stream.

He can still hear it, a dull echo, more inside his skull than rolling down the corridor. *Kiri-ya! Kiri-ya!*

Fuck!

"Rodriguez! Can you hear that?"

Tiny voice again, grim. "Hear what, sir?"

"That voice. The goddamned *shed*!"

"I can't hear much of anything. Concussion deafness." A pause, or what Ray assumes is a pause because he doesn't hear anything. "God, this is a fucking mess."

Kilgore, listening in, wants to know. "Give me a status report. The buzzards upstairs are circling."

Ray turns to see. *Check for vitals*, he's thinking. And it's beside him, a sharp sensation of pressure, like a touch of vacuum, cold as liquid oxygen, but dense. A slab of midnight dropped through a wormhole into a universe where it does not belong.

Glint of eye, shimmer of teeth and hands the size of cauldrons. *Well met, brother. Kiri-ya!*

Ray hears himself scream, but he doesn't have the attention to spend on it, doesn't even have time to feel the

stab of fear that prompted it. His feet have shifted, the deck tilts and his legs tangle in something wet, warm. He tumbles over it, a soft mass that can only be flesh, spasmodically jerking at the trigger of his subby and spitting a line of bullets in a long arc.

His back slams the deck, and for a second he can't breathe. He can't move. He's broken his spine by tripping over the body of a man he just killed. That's cosmic justice at work, if such a thing exists.

The *shed* advances into the light, grinning. It opens its arms wide, a span that seems to embrace the corridor from wall to wall.

For the second time in his life, confronted with the *shed*, he experiences the bizarre sense of doubled vision. Seeing and seeing through. Even in shadow, there is the other thing, the reflected image of a damp and alien figure with too many eyes, formless head, tentacled limbs all looming behind the image he can see, like a holo form projected into the air.

Ray presses his lungs for air, gasps. Like the cold boot of a computer system, everything comes back on line. Breath, thought, limbs, fingers. From the deck, he squeezes the trigger and lets fly a deadly stream of lead. He sees them pop the *shed's* skin, plunge into its chest, tearing black holes the circumference of a thumb.

Let us make the test, know the testing. Kiri-ya!

If it notices at all, it doesn't stop. Just comes on.

More fire erupts from the lift, Rodriguez adding his own small--pointless--contribution.

But it's too late. The *shed* is there, leaning, looming, filling the entire world with darkness and clammy, dead breath.

Ray lets his rifle fall, throws his hands across his face.

And the *shed* pauses. Its eyes trace the lines of his fingers, head tilts, blinks with curiosity.

What is this? Lesson, lesson. Brother learned a lesson. What is it?

Ring, ring, ring, Ray thinks.

A dozen more in his pocket, on his thigh. He scrabbles for the flap and digs in, grabs a handful. He doesn't have time to think about it, to dwell on the senselessness of the act, just clutches and howls and flings them all.

The *shed* whispers, "Kiri--!"

There's a sound like a sudden inhale, with an odor, acrid, like burning plastic.

And it's gone, popped out of existence.

Rodriguez, startled, barks, "What the fuck?"

But Ray can only lie still, panting, processing, thinking of Jack Holcomb. Motherfucker. He forces himself to his knees, one hand grappling with the bulk of his rifle, the other scrambling for the rolling beam of a flashlight which skitters back and forth between two corpses. With its assistance, he gathers up the wide-cast stone rings or at least as many as he can find, and shoves them back into his pocket. The last one is warm to

the touch, uncomfortably so and seems to glimmer in the darkness. A faint opalescence races around the internal circumference like a bead of mercury. Ray wishes he had brought Nomar with them, just so he could make the rat hold it--stuff it in one of those hidden internal compartments where Nomar could hack its metaphysical structure until the stars burned out. But instead he tears a strip of cloth from the hem of his shirt, wraps it up and stuffs it into his breast pocket where it seems to pulse like an irregular and dissonant heartbeat.

Then he starts moving again, because there are more crises to be averted. This was just the first.

He ducks into the lift with Rodriguez, even as he's dialing in the command net. Neither situation is pretty.

Kilgore: "I'm telling you cocksuckers to give me just a goddamned minute. I'll let you know their status as soon as they report it."

Background: "Lift sensors are reading that the car has arrived on Sigma and has jammed in the open position times one minute, fifteen seconds."

"What channel is Marlowe broadcasting on?" Becker demands.

Kilgore again. "As soon as I get something, Chief, I'll let you know. Until then, shut the fuck up."

And so on.

The lift car is just as muddled with limbs poking out in odd directions, a stream of blood funneling to the front of the car, over the lip of the door and running down into the shaft. The bodies are in assorted states of dress, from wrinkled trousers dragged on in the dark to sequined evening gowns and fine dark suits from folks hauled away from the celebration. They all have the same look about them now--eyes staring, glassy, full of surprise; hands splayed like they tried to use them to cover their faces at the last moment; feet in the air where the impact with lead and velocity knocked them down. Rodriguez has slung his rifle over his shoulder and picks through the tangle. It's a tedious and gory job, locating necks and carotid arteries, feeling for pulses, shoving the definite corpses out of the way. There isn't a better way to go about it. If someone is groaning for assistance, neither Rodriguez nor Ray would be able to hear them.

Then, movement. Just a ripple, what could be a deadfall shift of limbs, but Rodriguez and Ray see it at the same time. They plunge in with both hands, moving bodies, bulling their way through the soft mass of flesh. A hand emerges, shoved up through the tangle, dark fingers grasping. Ray takes it, heaves. He has to plant his feet against the blood-slickened floor and his boots try to fly out from under him. Then there's a forearm and Rodriguez clutches it and throws his weight in.

The man emerges, slow at first, sloughing off the corpses and spattered with their gore, and for all Ray can tell, some of his own. It reminds Ray of the farm, of hauling the legs of a coltish newborn calf from a lowing heifer. There's that same sense of tugging against the weight of the universe, then all of a sudden the calf is in the chute, sliding forward, irrevocably slipping toward life.

At last, Ray's feet go out from under him. He lets himself fall with a muted cry, looking in his mind's eye like a man who's slipped on a banana peel. The world's largest and stickiest banana peel, he thinks. The blood seeps into his shirt, wets his hair. He's a human sponge!

He stares up at the ceiling and the recessed lights for a moment, then they're blotted out by a thick, dark profile. The man looks down on him, hands on hips, eyebrow arched. Ray lies there for a time, just breathing, crushed by a sensation like relief.

Shortly, he says: "I've been meaning to tell you that I've been assigned to new duties. There are probably some things you should know: first and foremost being that I'm not really a systems vet; second, that we're in a bit of a spot at the moment. And for the record, none of this is strictly my fault, so don't even start."

Ziggy leans over and offers him a hand.

So it's worked out like this: they're back in Primary Reactor Control. Ziggy had the good fortune to have arrived early at the staging area because he and Nina have experienced more than their share of Deceleration Parties, gotten over the thrill and had decided to spend the evening in. He's not a reactor engineer, but he knows the basics of Van Nuys physics, or at least did years ago before he opted for a career in drone hardware and administration. Early at the staging area meant first into the lift and a convenient flesh buffer between himself and a misguided team of armed sec-os. This is good because he avoided injury and remained mobile, and he needs all of that mobility now as he rushes back and forth between control panels, goggling at the security monitors, figuring out the layout of the control center, and generally emitting a constant stream of tense profanities.

Ziggy is all they've got; all that was left. Rodriguez went off to find an aid station and returned with painkillers and a pressure wrap for Kilgore's ankle. Kilgore is now in a chair with Nomar on his lap and his foot propped on the security station panels while Rodriguez hangs out near the door with his subby making the argument that where there are four *shed*, there could be five, and if one team of sec-os could be fed bad intelligence, another could be just as easily drafted from anywhere on the ship.

And Ray. Ray is monitoring a command net that has gone stillborn silent except for the calm voice of Sorensen providing technical assistance for Ziggy, who has borrowed Kilgore's mobile. Sorensen keeps bemoaning the fact that he should be down there, coordinating efforts, but it would take too long to move, and he hadn't known that he would need to move in the first place. He'd done what he was supposed to do, right? Dispatched a backup team of engineers. How could he predict they'd be cut down like mown grass before they even arrived? How do you develop contingencies for something like this?

Ask the commanders of *Gorgon* and *Asp*, Ray thinks. They might have some insights to share.

He follows Ziggy from panel to panel, trying to look helpful, doing everything but asking: *What can I do? Do you want me to push this button? It looks like it wants to be pushed.* Every time he comes close to it, to being able to translate Sorensen's complex instructions and act on them, Ziggy gives him a wide-eyed and terrified look that suggests he'll more than likely throttle him if he touches anything. Between them, they've left blood and bits of human matter all over the panels and an arcane map of red footprints all over the room.

Sorensen growls, strain finally slipping into his voice. At last, Ray knows he's not the only one feeling panicked, but it doesn't make him feel better. He still imagines the commander standing at the comm in the lounge, his skin now greasy, his dress uniform wrinkled. He's mopping his forehead with a scented handkerchief. "The particle accelerators are offline? You can confirm that?"

"Confirmed," Ziggy responds. "But we're still too hot. There are enough ambient particles inside the reactors for critical fission."

"What are the readings for the tricadrian crystals?"

Ray has picked up the fact that the contact points are really energy depots constructed of a synthetic crystalline material that store nucleated energy for transfer through the plasma exchange tubes, and ultimately the thrust tubes. He knows just enough about plasma storage to realize that a burst of unshackled,

unmodulated energy anywhere in its vicinity is a lights out event.

Ziggy shakes his head wildly. "Primary crystals are maxed out. Secondary crystals have begun to bleed into their emergency reserve systems. All the modulating systems have blown."

"Then we flood the cores."

"That's my advice, Commander."

Just like that. The most stunning and potentially disastrous decisions are always made with an economy of words, Ray has found. All the work, all the frenzy is in the buildup. Once the event threshold is crossed, there's always a sense of the anti-climactic, of inevitability.

Ziggy says, "Give me the sequence."

Sorensen begins rattling off a series of highly technical, insanely jargoned phrases. Ray listens, chewing on his lip, spotting the things he's talking about two or three steps behind until he's hopelessly lost. To his surprise, Ziggy takes him by the elbow and steers him over to a wide bank of panels, its displays all backlit in red. Ziggy points at five buttons, biggish ones, set up high on the panels so that the average seated engineer would have to stand up and lean much of his body across other buttons and levers and switches to reach them. Ray takes this to mean that these are buttons one would have a strong investment in not pressing by accident.

Ziggy guides him through the sequence again, like a firing order. "When I tell you, you hit the first one. I tell you again, you hit the second, and so on. You wait for me to give the order before you touch anything. Understand?"

"Got it."

"Because if you push anything out of sequence, we're going to blow this ship up, Ray. All the failsafes have burned themselves up. The system is funneling energy back to the boards and they're going to try to burn themselves out before too long. Doing anything illogical is going to make it crash."

Ray nods. "Definitely don't want that."

"No, sir. I'm going to be over there--" Ziggy indicates another board three or four meters away. "--getting things started."

Ziggy wanders off, and Ray keeps an eye on him. He folds and unfolds his pointer finger, like he's limbering up for a serious physical effort. He's really just trying to keep his hands from shaking.

"By the numbers then," Ziggy says. "I'm going to try to retract the rods again."

He presses a button on his panel, which is supposed to be followed by the deep rumble of machinery as the rods are withdrawn like sparkplugs ratcheted out of a combustion engine. There is no rumble, no retraction.

"No movement," Kilgore confirms from his view of the security screens.

"Ray, prime the evacuation pumps."

He does, punching the first button. A new, higher klaxon joins the aural fray. This one is a wail rather than the alternating buzz of the general alarm.

Ziggy waits a few seconds, then says, "I'm flushing the tubes."

"Looks like panels are opening in the cores," Kilgore reports. "Down near the floor. With smoke coming out of them."

"Mist," Ziggy corrects him. "The transfer tubes are kept super-cooled, so they don't melt if the reactor tries to melt down."

"So smoke is good? Never would have guessed that."

"Smoke is good. Ray, there should be a small display screen above that second button. Seven bars that light up green."

Ray checks. "Seven bars, all green."

"That means the pumps are primed and ready. Open the valve on pump number one."

"Press the button?"

"Do it now. Count to three and press the next button. Do that until you've pressed them all."

He's aware that Ziggy, off to his left, is doing the same thing, moving a step at a time down the board pressing buttons in roughly the same places on his own board.

"Blast!" Kilgore snaps. "It looks like you just busted open a fire plug."

Ray turns to watch, thinking *mission accomplished*. Warm glow of success, fuzzy feelings of relief and pride, etc. Kilgore is right. The coolant from the tanks spews onto the floor like they've burst a water main, a yellowish fluid, slightly viscous. It looks to Ray like a critically ill patient's urine.

Ziggy reports to Sorensen. "Four minutes and counting to core saturation."

"Four minutes," Sorensen confirms. "Lock the Tricadrian crystals into their alternate storage cells. We'll need them to power the generators for the long wait."

Ziggy heads for another panel, another line of buttons to be pressed, and it should be all but over. At least, all but the *shed* hunting that must follow. Except Ray is watching the security monitors, having edged up behind Kilgore, and the *shed* in the cores merely glance at the coolant spilling at their feet. Except he's got this ring in his pocket that seems to be pulsing with a greater heat as the minutes pass, transubstantiating from stone to something more fleshy, organic, singing shadows in the folds of cloth he's wrapped it in.

As one, the *shed* release their hold on the rod mechanisms. Like haywire flywheels, the massive cages jerk upward, fling themselves at the ceiling, where they rebound with an inaudible crash powerful enough that Ray can feel the deck lurch beneath his feet. The rods tumble from the sky like a rain of spears and kick up spumes and spouts of coolant where they impact.

First one *shed*, then another, stoops to the contact points and with their immense fists, pound against the containment lids between reactor and crystals.

At his back, Ray hears the panels begin to pop. He shifts in time to see the one directly behind him spray a fountain of white hot sparks across the board, begin to smoke, then shudder and flare out. The displays blank; the lights burn out.

Ziggy screams into the comm. "I've just lost the containment system!"

Ray meets his eyes across the room, and Ziggy blinks at him, his jaw hanging. Dumbfounded by catastrophe.

"What does that mean?" Ray asks.

"I can't lock the crystals into their containment cells. They're wedged in the tracks--the servos are burning up."

"And?"

"They're out of their primary containment grid, Ray. The system failed. The backups are fried. They're going to crack in the plasma channel. Sooner or later, they're going to go critical."

Almost, almost he can feel the contact points thump like war drums beneath the blows of the *shed*. He takes a deep breath, all of his panic gone. Dread has left no room for it.

"Sorensen."

"Yes." The captain's voice is small, weak. He knows what Ray is about to say, cannot help but accept it.

"I suggest you sound the general evacuation, Captain. *Paraclete* is going down."

There's nothing happening at the moment, but there will be. Any instant now. If he could look at his watch, he'd confirm that, but there's no time. Instead, it's just running and thinking and picturing how it's going to be.

It will be a nightmare. He couldn't imagine anything worse if he had a lifetime to spend on it. Much worse than New Mes, where at least there were soldiers and they knew disaster and chaos were always just moments away. Worse than a full charge on a reinforced gunnery position, because even then you were mostly all moving the same direction, trying to achieve the same goal.

This was six thousand drunken passengers who had only paid moderate if any attention to the evac plan notices, trying to decide if the shipwide broadcast was someone's warped sense of humor. It was half of them trying to sober up enough to pay attention and the other half thinking about the fact that they were on the Garden, but their kids and households and valuables were four decks down and a thousand meters across, and then the pods that were their lifeline were more decks and more meters away. It was thousands of sudden psychopaths trying to jam into express lifts that weren't designed to handle such capacity while undermanned teams of sec-os impossibly tried to enforce some modicum of order. There would be screaming and crushing and trappings to death, and on the party decks, no one would be able to hear what Ray will hear: the canned evacuation message, feminine and calm, the ultimate in irony.

This is a message from the captain. All passengers and crew are advised to proceed in an orderly and immediate fashion to your designated emergency pods. Evacuation instructions are being transmitted to pod plotting systems. This is not a drill.

The command net has fallen silent. Becker dropped off the line almost at once, and Sorensen gave him five precious minutes before sounding the evacuation alert to get abovedecks to Security Command where he could coordinate the evacuation.

Ray doesn't even try the lift on Sigma. Even if it was still there when they reached it, other people had greater need, even if they didn't know it yet. He still has the flashlight he took from the sec-o team earlier, and he uses

it now to direct them back to the ladder from Omicron. So they run, slowed by Kilgore who hobbles at best, even with Rodriguez and a painkiller crutch to lean on. But they're making better progress than people in other parts of the ship, who don't even know they should be fleeing, and when they find out, will be first staggered, then frightened, then caught in the vectors of a human maelstrom trying to surge a hundred different directions at once. Among them, they've got a fairly clear mental map of the ladder systems, and they're in the sub-decks after hours, where crews are light under normal circumstances, and certainly all but abandoned now.

At Sub-deck Gamma, Ray is back in familiar territory, half a ship removed from his shop.

So many responsibilities, and he doesn't know if at any moment whether the *shed* will breach the containment lids and bash the tricadrian crystals into critical mass. He can't even begin to put together a timetable for this disaster.

He feels Ziggy--feral, wild, crazy. Ziggy is thinking about Nina, wondering whether or not she's still at their berth waiting for him after she receives the inevitable crew grapevine pulse that a disaster is imminent or assuming that the conjunction of his midnight absence with the unexpected ship's alarm means that he's already gone.

And Emma. Emma most of all.

Time. He doesn't know if they time.

He rounds on Ziggy, shouting because he still can't hear straight. "Do you know Iota-D?"

Ziggy goggles at him like he's asking a stupid question.

Small words. Clear enunciation. "Do you know how to get to Iota-D?"

Ziggy nods.

"Get Nina. Meet us there. We'll wait as long as we can."

Which is a terrible position to put him in, to put them all in. How long is that? Until the ship explodes and takes all of them with it? Or just a second too soon, with the blast doors on the pod sealed and the thrusters firing and suddenly there's Ziggy and Nina, that much too late, now decks away from their pod and having to fight the crowd to get there, if it's even still there when they arrive and hasn't fired early because someone panicked and ordered it to launch at only half-capacity. You heard stories about that kind of stuff happening all the time. Lifeboats armed and gone with only two or three people on board.

It was why evacuation was always the last resort, because once you released even hardened crew from central control it became every man for himself. Survival instinct stripped of the veneer of duty and honor and basic human compassion.

Ziggy doesn't wait to ponder the risks. He doesn't say a word, just darts off.

Ray, Rodriguez and Kilgore swing the opposite direction toward other ladders, digging deep into their collective memories for shortcuts they might have overlooked.

They reach Omega Deck, and they scramble, uncertain for the bank of private lifts--the ones utilized by the exclusive passengers in the D suites, lifts that don't appear on the level maps. And the only way Ray knows to get to Iota-D. It isn't serviced by ladders.

Ray turns to Nomar, who supposedly keeps a detailed ship schematic in his memory. Nomar hears him, nods once, then sprints in another direction, leaving them to follow.

It has been the longest five minutes of his life, but it ends with them in the lift, offering Ray's hacked lift codes and shooting up the elevator shaft toward Emma. The speaker inside the car emits a harsh, screeching whine. The three humans clamp their hands over their ears, and still they can hear it.

Then silence.

This is a message from the captain...

He sighs, slumps against the back of the lift with his eyes closed. Made it. Assuming the ship doesn't explode in the next few minutes, they've made it.

His relief lasts as long as it takes to register, then it is replaced by an odd sensation, a sense of disorientation.

He listens as the message cycles again, from the top. His eyes spring open. *This is a message from your captain. Passengers and crew are reminded that hard deceleration will begin at 12 o'clock Greenwich tomorrow. Please be in your assigned impact couches at that time to prevent potential injury. If you do not know the location of your designated impact couches, please request your assignment number from the nearest Security checkpoint. Thank you and enjoy the rest of the evening.*

"They're running the wrong message," Kilgore says, frowning.

"No," Rodriguez answers. "It's the right one. We're hearing it wrong. Like the Security teams."

Everyone is hearing it wrong, Ray thinks. Just like the other ships, which explained how they could have erupted so violently, so rapidly that not even one pod was jettisoned. Because the people who knew about the disaster stayed at their stations and those who were supposed to escape were never warned, or did not know they had been warned.

And there was nothing Ray could do to stop it.

Rodriguez understands also, whispers, "Oh my God."

There's a ball of dread in Ray's stomach, like a lump of mucous, damp and waxy and glutinous. The lift scuds to a halt and the door slides open on the quiet Iota-D corridor. Stepping outside feels to him like a moment of cowardice, but what else is there for him to do? No one would believe them without Sorensen's announced and official authorization to panic. So they trudge on, bewildered as though walking in a dream, leaving footprints of blood on the pale carpet. It's the only evidence they have that what they've seen, what they know is truth.

The message runs over shipwide comm again, same text, because Becker has realized that it's wrong. He has to keep trying to get through, even though he must suspect it's useless, as long as the *shed* remain. Maybe he can annoy people into action.

But he thinks of something else, because the next moment, the ship's depressurization alarms begin to blat, piercing and painful. The suddenness of it just about flings Ray out of his skin. Emergency lights in the corridor begin to strobe a strident red. No message this time, just klaxons, but how many people know they should head for the pods instead of just milling around waiting for instructions?

He doesn't worry. He trusts Becker and Sorensen to figure out what it is they're doing.

Instead, he points his finger at the door to the Whiston suite, gets Kilgore's attention. "Bang on the door. Rouse the house. If Frederick Whiston tries to prevent you in any way--" If he's even there and hasn't already run off, fled to save his own skin "--kill him."

Kilgore stares at him for a moment, as though certain he has misunderstood. He doesn't understand. Ray has not given him the context, and there's no time now.

Ray turns away and sprints the rest of the distance to Emma's door and hammers at it with his fist. The kako-daimon flashes onto the greeting screen, snarly at the rude awakening, but Ray doesn't give it time to get started. He smashes his fist against it and the display flares, ripples through a rainbow of pixels and goes dead.

Thirty seconds pass, so he starts shouting.

"Emma!"

Please, God. Let her be safe, even if it means he took her with him. Above all, do not let me open this door and find her on the floor, gore spattered and organ raped, another victim for the shed.

He can't hear anything over the alarms and Kilgore's insistent thump on the door down the hall. He doesn't know if she can even hear him. He's on the verge of unslinging his rifle and battering the door down with it when it opens.

Emma, her hair pulled back behind her head, her expression frozen, tentative, like a wince, and her short robe pulled tight around her shoulders. His knees suddenly want to fold at the sight of her. She's here; she's all right.

The mask of fear from being shaken out of bed in the middle of the night dissolves, replaced by an alarm as urgent as the ship's klaxons. Her hands reach for him. "Ray, my God, are you hurt?"

Hurt?

The question stuns him, but just for a moment. He's forgotten. He's sodden with the blood of the men he's killed, dripping onto the carpet. A nightmare given form. But he doesn't have time to explain. Ray pushes inside, catching her hands before she can grab him. He holds her by the wrists, leaving crimson smears on her arms.

"Emma, listen to me. We've got to go now. Get whatever you need and come with me."

"Come with you? Ray, what's happening? What is that noise?"

It's maddening, infuriating, but he suppresses his urge to scream at her. "The ship is going down. We need to get into the pod. Now."

But she doesn't dash for her room, to gather her clothes as he told her, but the other direction toward the hall. "I've got to get Amah, and the children!"

Because his hands are slick, she almost escapes him. He makes eye contact, tries to reflect a calm and purpose that is sheer simulation. "I've already taken care of them. They'll meet us in the pod, but you've got to grab what you need to travel and hurry. We don't have much time."

And even as he says it, *Paraclete* shudders around them. The shockwave an instant later lurches the deck beneath their feet, and Ray stumbles to keep his balance. The lights flicker as the hardwired electricals switch

to auxiliary systems and dim startlingly.

From the hall, Rodriguez shouts: "They're through the containment grid. The reactors are going to blow!"

It's enough. Emma springs toward her bedroom. Ray, desperate to shield her, wants to follow, but he has other responsibilities. He darts back out into the hallway to see what is taking so long at the main complex. There's Frederick Whiston, fucking child murderer, fucking Lilaiken, the man who would kill them all. He's barring the doorway with his body, red-faced from screaming at Kilgore, with his arms cocked at his sides like he's on the verge of lashing out with his fists. He's wearing a creased and wrinkled evening jacket as though he's just returned from an impressive drunk.

Kilgore is bawling over his protests with perfect, Marine calm. "Sir, I want you to proceed to the emergency pod! I don't have time to argue with you about this."

Peripherally, Whiston sees Ray emerging from Emma's room. He jabs a long finger at Ray and shouts. "You! I might have bloody known. Get off my deck!"

"I tried to reason with him," Kilgore shouts to Ray, shrugging.

Whiston swings his back on them. "I'm calling Security."

What is Frederick even doing here? What is going on?

No time. No time to parse any of it, only to recognize that he can't leave Frederick behind, can't just kill him and be done with it. There are too many things he has to answer for before Ray is done with him.

Ray surges past Kilgore and Rodriguez into the atrium. He gets one hand on Whiston's shoulder, pulls hard enough to spin him around. Before Frederick can protest, Ray hits him squarely on the point of his chin and Frederick goes down with an abbreviated squawk, as quick and boneless as one of the *shed's* victims.

Ray indicates the body to Rodriguez. "Pitch him into the pod."

Then he turns back toward the suite, and there's Amah, emerging from the far hallway with a shawl cast around her shoulders. She glances from the rubble of Frederick to Ray, blood streaked and fierce. Her eyelids narrow, but she says nothing.

Ray crosses the room to her. "Get the children up. We're loading you into the emergency pod."

Cool, unspeaking, Amah tilts her head at him, considering him for a moment longer, then steps aside. Behind her, eyes wide and mouths trembling, the Whiston orphans stand in a line, still in their pajamas, clutching teddy bears and favorite books. Behind them are more domestics, dark like Amah, with canvas bundles over their shoulders.

His relief is so strong, he could almost collapse. If he had time for such things, that is.

But he doesn't. He nods, turns on his heel and leads them out into hall where Rodriguez waits with Frederick slung over his shoulder, and Kilgore, Nomar, and Emma, tiny and scared behind them, pressing herself against the wall. Ray steps out of the way and begins directing traffic, trying not to look like he's on the verge of panic as he waves the children down the hall toward the podship and escape. It's hard because he *feels* panicked, frenzied, measuring each moment that the ship doesn't explode as an undeserved reprieve. He's moving in slow motion.

Behind him, the lift pings, the doors open, and there's Ziggy stumbling out into the corridor, his face rigid and fierce. Ziggy alone, and the first thought that crosses Ray's mind is that Nina has already responded to the depressurization warning, already locked herself into an emergency pod and jettisoned herself into space.

Ray turns his face toward the lift, questioning, curious, his hands empty in order to encourage the stragglers to hurry to the pod, the weight of his rifle a tug against his shoulder.

Ziggy lumbers down the corridor. *Where's Nine?*

"Gun!" Kilgore barks.

Gun?

He's too slow, just another spectator caught in a lunatic eruption of unfathomable events. Ziggy lifts his weapon awkwardly, like a man who isn't certain how such a device should be used. But it's easy, just point and shoot, let the rifle do the rest.

Gun?

Too many things are happening. Rodriguez fumbling with Frederick's deadweight, shedding his body like an empty rucksack. Kilgore, nearest to Emma, jerking his rifle up to his shoulder, hobbling on his shattered ankle to get between her and Ziggy's line of fire.

Ray's next thought, horrified: *Should have given him a ring.*

He hadn't thought about it. He'd been too preoccupied with escaping the remaining *shed* that it never occurred to him that they could perpetrate even more mischief than destroying the reactors, than detonating the entire ship. That they could take possession of Ziggy's mind as easily and thoroughly as they had done Becker's dead sec-os.

Ziggy's weapon barks at them, spits tongues of orange flame. The bullets chew holes along the wall in an uneven line near Rodriguez's head, and he's still trying to slough off Frederick's limbs, still trying to get his rifle up, now trying to duck, to slink out of the way.

Through the roar of gunfire, Emma screams, high, surprised, cut off sharply as though hacked with an axe.

Corporal Rodriguez lurches suddenly; a small, perfect hole appears in the center of his forehead. He looks surprised, stunned by realization, eyes big as saucers. The back of his head opens up like a spring flower, spatters the wall. Knees buckle, arms slack, he does not so much fold to the deck as he topples, empty of life.

Ray snaps into real time, howling protests. His rifle is too far away, kilometers, light years, so he drags the pistol from his harness. Kilgore returns fire first, blasting on full automatic.

He's shouting to Emma, "Get down! Get down! Get down!" As though he can shove her out of harm's way if he says it enough times.

Ziggy and Kilgore, their streams of fire converge, impact. Ziggy stumbles backward, shuddering, with holes punched across his chest in a neat line from thigh to shoulder. The barrel of his weapon tilts up, taking out recessed light fixtures, lodging bullets in the ceiling tiles. He hits the lift doors, rebounds a step as though he can fire at them forever, then the eyes roll up, the mouth falls open. He smacks the deck, face against the carpet. One breath, one exhalation, and he doesn't move again.

Ray points his pistol, completely impotent. He didn't even get a shot off.

I should have given him a ring.

"Ray?"

Emma's voice, beseeching, desperate, but he can't seem to tear his gaze away from Ziggy, sprawled along the deck like discarded laundry. And Rodriguez, hands clutched around his rifle, most of it buried beneath him, and his blood and brain matter beginning to slide down the wall.

"Ray!"

He turns to her, ponderous, a derelict starship traveling in an uncharted galaxy. She's on her knees, her small hands pressed against Kilgore's chest and stomach where blood bubbles up from the folds of fabric, between her fingers. And she doesn't have enough hands for all his injuries. A hole in his left thigh. A chunk of his throat the size of Ray's fist sheared cleanly away. Arterial blood pours onto the carpet in a constant spurt.

Emma stares at him. "What do I do?"

Nothing. There's nothing she can do.

Kilgore makes a last noise, a word that sounds like *motherfucker*. Then he's gone.

Oddly, inexplicably, Ray thinks: *Kiri-ya!* Then he does all that remains for him. He bends down, shoves Rodriguez out of the way and pulls Frederick's limp body onto his shoulder. He takes two steps, over Kilgore, and extends his free hand to Emma. She takes it, rises, unable to drag her eyes away from the body as Kilgore's blood drips from her hands, runs in small streams down her bare legs.

Ahead of them, the cluster of orphans, the Whiston household. Children wailing.

Their fear is the only thing that penetrates.

With a margin of safety measured in seconds, in heartbeats, they race to the end of the corridor. Ray pushes past the children of the Trust where they huddle in clumps against the wall, unable to dispense comfort, on through pressure door at the end which he opens by ship emergency authorization codes rather than waiting for Emma or someone else to come up with the private Whiston key. Beyond it is a utilitarian hall, metal walls and bare deckplate floor. Their advance across it echoes like a roll of thunder.

Then a hatch, and a chute like the fire escape in Ray's old elementary school, just a black maw that seems to open on emptiness. He sends Emma first, squeezing her shoulder as he helps her down, then gives her a push to get her started. After that, it's loading the children as quickly and efficiently as possible. Lastly, Ray drops Frederick, careless of bruising, shoves him through. Then he sets the timer to seal the hatch behind them. Nomar scrabbles up his pantleg onto his shoulder and they slide together, a heart-stopping plummet through darkness. A bright light, and he doesn't have time to wonder over it, then he's spilling onto another deck, tumbling like a child's doll tossed into the toy chest at the end of afternoon play.

The second hatch shuts with a hum and a snap, and he's in the passenger compartment, a broad circle of upright impact couches arrayed from wall to wall. In the center is a data access island, what passes for ship controls in a craft designed to fly without human interference. Beyond the circumference of the couches is the small galley, the head, a closet stuffed with emergency survival gear. Poked into the walls, above the heads of the seated passengers, are portholes that show him the naked, hostile darkness of space.

The podship's navigational computer comes on-line.

Emergency Podship Four-Delta-One initiating launch sequence. Navigation systems functioning, star charts calibrated for nearest occupied zone per previous instructions. Automatic piloting mechanisms activated. Emergency distress beacons activated. All passengers are advised to take necessary precautions for imminent thrust stress.

The voice goes on, verifying that all the automated systems are working as advertised. Ray rolls to his feet, throws himself around for several seconds checking on the others, getting pressure harnesses tightened and kids strapped into impact couches. Though she doesn't need his assistance, he examines Emma's gear, too. He can't help himself. He casts his eyes a last time over the circular seating area, all the couches filled, all the harnesses snapped. They're over capacity by one, it seems. Maybe he should have left Freddy behind.

Thrusters fire in ten...nine...eight...

Just get on with it!

The indomitable fortress that is *Paraclete* jerks with a sharp, hull rattling concussion. The podship, still bound by its magnetic moorings gives a convulsive shudder, utters a screech of nanosteel. Ray is hurled backward, toward the loading chute, rolling head over heels, finally settling flat on his back.

He stays in that position, steadying his breath, wondering if he's going to survive this.

The countdown hits two and the mooring clamps release. The podship drops into a simulated freefall, a small burst of thrust to get them clear.

Then it's pure, jarring acceleration for so many seconds, Ray loses count. He's drawn out, stretched thin, ripped by thrust and gravitation and frantic, plunging speed. His body goes numb, seems pinned to the deckplate in a way that reminds him of county fairs and a carnival ride where he stood in the equivalent of a giant centrifuge while seedy, grinning carnies spun him around and around until his feet left the ground and his weight turned to lead. Crazy, crazy, good times. The greasy delicious smell of corn dogs and elephant ears over the more earthy pungence of cows and horses and pigs jammed into stalls, baking under a blue sky, a white-hot July sun and sheetmetal roof.

But he retains consciousness.

Because he cannot move, he is forced to see. Through the porthole plastisheen set in the hatch by which they made their escape, *Paraclete* shrinking as the podship dives away. She's there, the grand ship transfixed, a blue whale lumbering through a darkling ocean, firing off sparks--other podships. One, two, three, but not many. Not enough. Not more than a dozen.

She bucks suddenly, seems to bend at an odd angle amidships, like she's going to change directions, burst for cooler waters. An orange flare erupts from below, rends her skin, opens on vacuum, snuffs like a candle. And *Paraclete* cracks along the spine, spews torn metal and cargo and canned atmosphere. It is a plasma jet of human debris, a planet devoured by a rogue singularity, a ripple of explosive forces he cannot begin to comprehend spearing into space at the cardinal points.

Paraclete winks out of existence, her light extinguished, just another dead shadow in the void.

Ray Marlowe, soaked in blood, dead with fatigue and horror and loss, watches her vanish and sobs.

Part Two

Chapter One

This is what it feels like to be dead. This grimness, this sense of carrying on despite the lack of will, this parched aching like he's been punched in the gut one time too many to actually register real pain. There is pain, certainly, when he thinks about little things: Frankie V's biscotti with coffee, Madame Trusseau's weekly open microphone talent show, the way Commander Sorensen stroked his temples when he became frustrated. Rich Becker, Captain Cable--who he really didn't even know, that annoying feeling of waking up thirsty in the berth on the Garden, and the even deeper annoyance of knowing he couldn't just go to the sink for a glass of water but had to trundle all the way down to Corrigan's. Each of these discrete packets of memory stab at him, but it's the only way he can understand it. Taken together, the entire wild and frenzied and chaotic life of *Paraclete*, it's impossible. It's just too big.

So he doesn't really try.

Ray's been here before, this place of mourning and naked grief, back when he was just another Gunny Sergeant pitching in to ready a company for battle in the desert. This was before he played Entertainment Director to mission-oriented lieutenants like Jack Holcomb, before he'd made a name for himself in the closed Wadi Wadi community. There are a great many men in a company, too many in war time to actually know them all and put faces and names and colorful anecdotes together. They shuffled in and out of his command too quickly to be anything but cardboard cutouts of soldiers, and he was very often a cardboard cutout sergeant in return. Lots of screaming and making up orders to keep them occupied, and always too busy or too professional to actually meet them in any way that touched upon their human reality.

And then one day you dragged this gaggle of training and weaponry onto the battlefield, and in the space of hours, watched them drop off, fall over, explode in flame. Then, when it was done, whether or not the objective had been achieved, what remained was a computer printout like a scoresheet, columns marked KIA, MIA, Medical. A tally of the dead and wounded, last name first, and just a kind of dull awareness that he might have gotten the wrong list, *must* have gotten the wrong list, because he didn't recognize any one of the soldiers who had been placed in his care.

After a while, he understood that any grief he felt wasn't really grief at all. It was a mechanical facsimile of grief, because social convention told him that the experience of that suffering was what was expected of him.

Paraclete was immense compared to a little thing like a company, and he's been so self-involved with investigations and data matches and rat maintenance that very little of her was articulated. Only Sorensen and Becker, Kilgore and Rodriguez, Ziggy and Nina. Those are the only losses he can understand; understand but not properly feel, because it's too soon, too fresh. They're small tragedies in the context of things, but they're vast, too. As vast as all of *Paraclete* in some ways, because he knows them, knew them, was responsible for them and their deaths. Either directly or indirectly, but all because of his own lapses, lacks, failures.

He should have given Ziggy a ring, as a precaution.

He shouldn't have wasted time trying to stop the *shed* in the reactors, just demanded that Sorensen begin the evacuation. Maybe then they could have salvaged something.

He should have worked harder, faster, smarter.

But even this is a game, a muddled entertainment he plays with himself as he tries to make sense of it all. The fact is that it's a logical exercise, like a debriefing, conducted with the same, familiar detachment of a man explaining battlefield disasters to superiors who can't understand a word of what he's trying to relate because they weren't there.

It's very Gnostic. Salvation knowledge that must be transmitted straight from the mind of God, because it's impossible to relate in human tongues. You either know or you don't. There is no process of knowing, no coming to understand. It's all words without context, because the context is impenetrable.

I alone, he thinks, I alone have escaped to tell you...

Paraclete. Rodriguez. Kilgore. Ziggy. They're all too big for him to process. For now, they're simply gone, nothing else.

The people who remain, the only ones left who had any specificity or identity for him are here, on this podship. He has saved what was most important to him and damned everything else. This is a relief, a guilty pleasure, but it isn't enough to remove the pall that hovers over him from watching *Paraclete* die. That vision will stay with him forever.

But the truth was mostly that he has locked himself away from suffering. Ray chose to accept the deadness, embrace it.

Because there is no time, no space for grief.

Because he feels like he has been stripped down to some level of fundamental, essential self--a Ray that has no idea how to interact with the world.

Because despite that, someone needed to be in charge.

Because there were a dozen alternately terrified and bored children to deal with.

Because Frederick Whiston hadn't had anything to drink in twelve hours and was on the verge of plunging either into D.T.'s or an outright alcoholic coma. And if he did die, it would be a grand travesty of justice, and Ray is determined to salvage that, if nothing else.

Because thrumming in his breast pocket, right over his heart, is still a ring and a glimmer and the compacted essence of a *shed* that he has absolutely no idea what to do with.

And because Emma, always Emma, is right there in front of him all the time, each of her words pregnant with need, but he has nothing to say that could comfort her. He couldn't even simply take her onto his lap and stroke her fine, golden hair and whisper into her ear while she slept because it would be indulgent, because the situation was too complicated.

And even those things are just a part of his human, emotional maelstrom, because mostly he is just pissed off. Angry with his own stupidity after he hadn't figured things out in time, and his failures that led to the accomplishment of nothing but a dozen gunned down sec-os, and with his continued, obliterating, blinding confusion about the whole thing.

If the murder of little Micah Uytdehaage had been a message directed at him, what had the content of that message really been? What had he missed that made the next logical step in the communication process the destruction of a starship loaded with innocents? And though he could prove that Frederick Whiston had murdered Micah Uytdehaage, that he had indeed attempted to summon a *shed*, did that truly mean that Frederick Whiston had tried again, succeeded, doomed the entire starship? Frederick Whiston alone, or in consort with Lilaikens Ray had somehow missed?

And whether from tactical failure or sheer mental dense-ness, how much culpability did he carry for all those lives wasted?

Ray has been over this territory what seems like a thousand times already, but there are never any answers, and he's tired of plaguing himself with issues he can't adequately address until he's on the ground, working in consort with EED. So he turns his back on them again and listens to radio chatter. They talk to him sometimes, the dispatchers based on New Holyoke Port Authority Station, where *Paraclete* had intended to dock. Other times they talk at him, assuring him they're still tracking the distress beacon, updating him on the rescue mission being mounted and telling him despite all evidence to the contrary that no matter how catastrophic the depressurization or how spectacular the destruction appeared, there were always pockets of atmosphere on a starship--that was why they built all those pressure bulkheads, for God's sake. Right? Cajoling, pleading, joking, because somebody needed to be assured that everything was going to be okay.

Ray sits in what amounts to a pilot's cockpit in the nose of the podship. He doesn't actually pilot anything. In fact, he is almost obsessively careful about refraining from touching any of the controls or buttons, levers or keypads at his disposal. The ship is more than capable of flying and landing itself, and she reports her steady progress as monotonously as the dispatchers from the Port Authority, scrolling her course corrections and time estimates and critical system analyses across a dozen small monitors every few seconds. He's got Nomar curled up in his lap, simulating the sleep everyone else is practicing for real back in the passenger compartment. He has a cumbersome headset strapped over his ears which ports into the comm system so he can receive and pass messages without being overheard.

From the flight chair, he can track their grand swoop down to the planet. New Holyoke is a fat and mottled blue marble that blots out the darkness of space in his viewing port, close enough he imagines he could touch it with his fingers. It's just a matter of hours now. Not the two plus days *Paraclete* had estimated because of the thrust they'd ridden from the accident scene, and because the podship was small, could decelerate with much less fanfare and effort, would, in fact, do most of her velocity shedding in the sweaty planetary atmosphere.

There, they'd be greeted by throngs of EED handlers and reporters and tabloid paparazzi, the entire social din and clangor of New Holyoke society more than likely. That was another big mistake on his part. Shortly into their escape, Emma had told him about the cockpit tucked on the other side of the supply closet, out of the way where well-intentioned dumbasses wouldn't be tempted to screw around with instruments they didn't understand. His thoughts had seemed logical enough: get EED on the comm, let them know about *Paraclete*, even though she was well within tracking range of the station's sensor grid. But he needed to make sure he had their attention, so he gave them his name, *Commander Ray Marlowe*, and told them he was flying the Whiston escape craft, and yes, he had all the Whistons on-board and safely accounted for. It was just a matter of time before that filtered down to the planet and the news net.

Definitely not your standard covert infiltration technique.

The standard shipping traffic comm phases out, the channel gives the impression that it's fading as it locks into a one-to-one secure protocol.

"You still with me, Ray?"

He recognizes the voice, some kid lieutenant with the Port Authority named Alvin Kato who has been his primary contact with the station since the first call. Every once in a while, some ranked assbag tries to bust in on them, all stiff and official and military professional, but Ray has made it a policy to blow them off. There's nothing they can do to help him.

He says quietly, "Howdy, Kate. How are we looking?"

"Five by five. We're estimating your arrival at zero-two-thirty local time. They'll have the airfield lit up like a football stadium and we'll more than likely override your shipboard systems to bring you down. You just sit

back and relax, buddy. The hard part's over."

"I'll believe that when I see it."

Kato chuckles into his ear. "What's the status on your medical conditions?"

He's already told them to have emergency medical teams standing by, thinking about Freddy, despite the fact that he still just wants to punch him in the mouth, and the fact that he's more or less unconscious, and Ray doesn't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing. Most of all, he just doesn't want to take any chances, because the Whiston clan has endured about all the trauma it can probably stand. He'd like to specify the nature of the injuries, that good old Freddy can't handle half a day without a bracing tippie to keep him upright, but it would appear unfair of him, and he doesn't trust the security of the channel. Every news agency and hack reporter on New Holyoke is probably listening in.

On the other hand, he can't resist the urge to mess with the eavesdroppers a little bit.

"We'll make it, more than likely. I'll let you know if one of them decides to kick off."

Kato is silent for a moment, then says, "Um, you're not talking about one of the Whistons, are you?"

"Like which Whistons would you be referring to, Kate?"

"Emma or Frederick. There are folks here who would like to know."

"Who can tell? They all look alike to me."

"Sure, well. Yeah, I understand that, but some people would like it if you would, you know, *ask* the passengers and see if any of the Whistons are in need of emergency medical attention."

"No problem. I've got a few other things to take care of, but I can probably get to that in a little bit. Got to get these fires and things put out first."

"Fires?" For just a moment, young lieutenant Kato sounds like he's going to soil himself.

Ray likes messing with him. It's the only thing that makes him feel even remotely normal at the moment. "Absolutely. Fires, then some plagues, locusts, standard catastrophic stuff."

Relief across the airwaves. "You're just teasing me."

"I'm just trying to make it clear to you where your request stands on my list of priorities."

"Fair enough."

Ray suspects that Kato's relief has something to do with the way his voice gets all giddy when he mentions Emma's name, which he does more than seems to be strictly necessary. This would amuse him if it didn't spend so much time annoying him.

Kato goes on after a brief pause. "There's some EED brass up from ground control who would like to talk to you in a few minutes. They're in a bit of a bunch over the *Paraclete* situation. They'd like to know why there wasn't a distress call issued until right at the last."

"They can talk to me when I'm on the ground. Tell them I said so."

"Ray, these are like colonels and shit. I can't tell them that."

"They should know better than to debrief me on what is more than likely a hacked comm line."

"Still..."

"I'm just going to tell them to fuck off. You might warn them in advance, in case they're sensitive to foul language."

The kid's confused by his reaction, and Ray can't really blame him. "They just want to get the investigation up and running as quickly as possible. No one has had much luck so far, and we'd sure like to be the ones to change it."

He's talking about *Fortitude*, *Gorgon*, *Asp*, the other ship disasters.

"Have they been in contact with other podships?" All six of them.

"They're mostly civvies and low level crew. They're as confused as we are."

Not surprising, really. "Hey, who's the CO of the EED team?"

"Colonel Ritchie."

"What's he look like?"

Kato hesitates, like he's puzzled by the question. "Uh, big guy, Scottish, I think. Has something of an accent."

"Right," Ray says, nodding. "Sort of tall, hairy. Looks like the type of backwoods, inbred, buck-toothed poof that likes to screw his pigs when he isn't rolling his own mother in the hayloft? That guy?"

He is greeted by stunned silence.

"Fuck off, Colonel," he adds distinctly. "You can talk to me after we land, not before, and I don't appreciate you trying to nose in on a private conversation. Are we clear?"

Kato snorts, an ineffective attempt to suppress his laughter. There's a muffled click as the extra pair of ears fall off the line.

"I don't hold you responsible for the rudeness of others, Kate."

"I appreciate that, Ray. But you do realize that you have to come down sometime, right? And he *is* a colonel."

"That's okay. I'm not exactly career officer material anyway."

"I've detected that about you, sir."

"Good. You're perceptive, Lieutenant. Freed from my poor influence, I suspect you'll go far. Now, I'm tired and I need to check up on my passengers. I'll swing back around when we breach the atmosphere and you can talk us down, okay?"

"Right. This is Port Authority breaking transmission."

"Podship out."

Ray removes the headset and lifts Nomar gently from his lap before rising and exiting the tight confines of the piloting cabin. Nomar seems content to remain curled in the chair like a sleeping cat, though Ray suspects he's doing anything but sleeping. In fact, he has begun to realize that the rat is assiduously attentive to the conversations taking place via radio--at least the one's he's allowed to listen to. Not for the first time, Ray wonders if his release of Nomar's dynamic data processing intelligence is as benign as it appeared to be when he made the decision.

He squeezes through the equipment closet, brushing past the sleeves of racked environmental suits and trying not to trip over the prepackaged, shrink-wrapped rucksacks stacked along the floor. When he reaches the cabin door, he eases it open quietly, for just a peek really. He doesn't want to wake any of the kids. Most definitely doesn't want to wake the kids if he's going to be the only adult alert and moving around. He's not a play with the kids and keep them merrily entertained kind of guy, not the favorite uncle that rolls and wrestles and keeps children in peeing-down-their-legs stitches. He's old enough to have realized this about himself and to not be disappointed by it.

The oldest of the children sleep alone, near the caramel-skinned retainers, Amah's kin more than likely. The smaller ones have abandoned their couches, piling onto adult laps, sprawled across adult knees like hanging monkeys. Emma is a space away from them all. Ray can't tell if she's sleeping lightly or soundly, only that she doesn't move, and that she has her small hands folded across her stomach and her head turned away from him. This is probably a good sign, a signal that maybe she isn't dreaming about Kilgore and bullet wounds that wouldn't stop bleeding.

Carefully, he eases into the passenger cabin. It's been hours since he slept. Hours and hours, really. So long ago he doesn't even properly remember the last time. There's been too much violence and blood since then, so that it seems like another lifetime. But at least he's got the worst of it washed out of his hair, courtesy of the sink in the cramped head, though he made a frightening mess in the process. He found fresh clothes that fit him in the supply closet and purged the old ones into space. It didn't really help. He still feels filthy with gore.

Ray makes a circuit of the sleepers in their couches, glancing at them one by one, for no other reason than that he feels protective of them in the same way he used to wander the tent barracks late at night in New Mes, trying where possible to put the sleeping faces and names of his soldiers together. When he's done, he thinks about locating one of the abandoned couches and catching a few hours himself, though more than likely he'll just toss and turn and wonder what the radio traffic is saying, what disasters might be popping up to nab an unsuspecting podship on a preprogrammed flight routine.

But the couch next to Emma is empty, and that's tempting. Sorely tempting, even if he can't do anything but peer at her over the lip of the seat's egg-shaped bowl while she sleeps.

Because he's sensitive, almost hyper-aware in the silence of the cabin, he hears the flutter of eyelids, turns toward the sound, and there's Amah. She shifts her weight and the couch's hydraulic system guesses her intent, rights itself with a painful wheeze of straining servomotors as it adjusts to her bulk, so that her feet are on the floor. The old woman considers him across the intervening meters of space, not bothering to unsnap her restraints, just to watch, as if she's been awake and waiting for him all along. The lights in the compartment are dim, to make it easier for the children to sleep, and in the shadows, her face is mottled, a patchwork of shimmering darkness from which only her small, dark eyes emerge.

"We're still a few hours out," he says to her, putting on his most cordial voice. Since he hasn't used this particular mode in awhile, years, it creaks a bit, sounds more harsh than polite. "There's nothing to worry about. Just wanted to check up on everyone."

Go back to sleep, he's thinking at her, as hard as he can. *Please. For the love of God, even.*

But she either has no particular divine devotion in her or he just isn't being sufficiently clear, because she says, "Have you secured medical services for Frederick?"

"Yes, ma'am. There will be ambulances waiting for us at the airfield." As he indicated to Kate, Frederick Whiston's medical care rates extremely low on his list of priorities at this moment, but he's aware he can't say such a thing in present company. Amah does not share his context. "I'm sure they'll know what to do with him."

Amah nods, satisfied. "I have not told you of our appreciation for the things you have done. Nor offered our condolences for your loss."

Wince. He assumes she means the Whiston family.

"I should have done more, but I'm not sorry that you and your family escaped."

"Some more than others, perhaps," she says.

"Pardon me?"

"I'm speaking of Emma. You saved her at great risk to yourself, and at fatal risk to your friends."

"Well," he says. "I don't know that I'd look at it that way."

"It is not an evil impulse to love one thing to the exclusion of all others, Mr. Marlowe."

He wouldn't have said *that*, either, so he just nods, gives one of those look-at-the-time gestures and starts to move away.

"May I make a request of you?"

Ugh. "Yes?"

"You have been told, I assume, by Port Authority to expect a media presence when we land. The Whiston family they know; you they do not. Your heroism will be apparent, and there will be many who wish to speak with you. I would ask that you be delicate."

"Delicate," Ray says slowly, chewing the word for nuances.

"Frederick is not in his most public and presentable form at this moment. I have given him some pills from the medical chest to allow him to sleep, maybe to sleep all the way until landing. Our doctors--family physicians--will certainly meet us there, as will these reporters and tabloid photographers. They will be curious to know what sort of injuries Frederick might have sustained during the evacuation."

"Understandable."

"But the truth should not be permitted to them."

Ray nods, feeling oddly numb. He thinks it might be an angry sort of numbness, but the muscles of his face aren't sending him enough signals for him to decipher what they might be thinking. It doesn't strike him as a particularly reasonable request. Not given the context of child murder and the destruction of the ship.

"You mean they don't know he's such a lush that a few hours without something to drink nearly put him in a coma?"

"Frederick's vices are not great secrets, Mr. Marlowe. But what is known and what is spoken are not necessarily the same," Amah returns. She seems to dismiss his rancor as though it did not exist. "I only ask that you not punish the innocent to satisfy your personal grievances."

She, of course, means his tendency to knock Emma around. As if that was a small thing, permissible, family business. Maybe if someone had stopped him earlier, his willingness to batter the weak, Micah Uytdehaage would still be alive, Kilgore and Rodriguez and Becker would still be alive. He has legitimate reason to be offended either way; the difference is only a matter of scale.

"Of course I wouldn't want to soil the family reputation with honesty," Ray responds.

Amah's lips turn down, frowning at his bluntness. "I don't ask you to tell any lies, Mr. Marlowe. They do not suit you. Certainly, you tell your share, maybe more than your share, but you take no pleasure in it. You lie because it is necessary, because a greater good comes from your lies than would come from the truth. For the Whiston family, for the children and the Trust and the colony itself, I would like you to see this situation in that light, that the truth might be detrimental to the greater good. You needn't lie, just avoid saying the truth in places where it might cause harm."

"Do you just not get how wrong it is for you to be asking this of me right now?"

Amah only looks at him, impenetrable, like he's being a fool.

He's not being very reasonable, actually. He has no idea what it is like to be in her place, to be Whiston. Maybe from her perspective this ass-covering after a disaster qualifies as some sort of imperative. Just as much as revenge.

"I don't know what kind of man you think I am," he says, stiff and level, but it feels like relenting. "I have no interest in airing your dirty laundry for the tabloids."

This seems to amuse her. "For Emma's sake?"

"For Emma's sake, for my sake. I can't say I particularly care if Frederick is a drunk."

"Spoken as though you've had no interest in this family. You prefer to watch from a distance, to monitor our comings and goings through quiet networks, your drones and rats."

Ray stands there, gaping at her. Amah smiles, cool and unfriendly.

"Ah, you believe you are the only one who sees and hears what is no business of his. You know little of the ways of the Dag Maoudi. I, on the other hand, know much about the ways of your kind. You who gain advantage by treachery and stealth. You haven't been exactly forthcoming about your true employment, Mr. Marlowe."

"My true employment is definitely not any of your business," Ray says. "Regardless of your source of information."

Treachery and stealth, my ass.

But Amah isn't done with him. "I trust that you managed to gather enough evidence to reflect the fact that

Frederick is not the sort of individual who would murder a child in his care."

"I think you know exactly what I found." For some reason, he knows it is true as soon as he says it.

"Rumor. Innuendo. Facts without understanding," she says flatly.

Ray shrugs. It's the wrong time to go into it. "It's enough. Enough to warrant further investigation, at least."

"Perhaps."

Perhaps. What does that even mean?

She is completely unflustered by his revelations. Or she just doesn't care.

"And what will you do with 'enough'? Will you go to the local Security forces, a stranger in a strange land, and accuse the son of the Whiston clan? Or will you go to your own people, your EED, expecting them to believe that for which you have no proof but your word?"

And it's there, between them, like a sudden illumination. A light in a dark room. All of his evidence, his case file, the data gathered by drones, corroborated by Kilgore and Rodriguez, authorized by Becker. Any preliminary warrants that might have been entered into the Security network. It was all on the ship. All of it.

"The Port Authority can recover the data core," he snaps, but it is a brittle sound. "The evidence is there."

"And you're certain the Port Authority will give you this documentation from which you will build your case."

"He *murdered* that child," Ray says, growling, keeping his voice low. More than that, he summoned a *shed*, he destroyed the lives of thousands, he--but Ray will not say these things to her. She knows nothing of the *shed* and would just dismiss him as mad. He licks his lips, grips the taut cord of his growing wrath before it snaps, breathes. "What part of that don't you understand?"

"I do not excuse him. It was a great crime."

"But not enough that he should be prosecuted for it? Is that what you're saying?"

He feels hysterical, like he's on the verge of screaming. Because that's exactly what she's saying. In the podship, surrounded by children, fleeing the destruction of *Paraclete*, that is precisely what she is saying.

"You have a duty to perform. I understand this. I grasp the impulse that drives you, to do what you have been made to do. It is even laudable, but it is also short-sighted."

"Short-sighted?"

Amah nods. Pleasant and patient. Teacher to pupil. "I wonder if you've given any thought to explaining these things to Emma? Already she's asking herself what brought you bloody and battle scarred to our door. Why you would be the one with a rifle in hand and Marines at your shoulder. What are you going to say to her when she asks?" There's a twinkle in Amah's muddy, dark eyes, like she's enjoying herself. "That will be a hard question for you to answer, but not nearly as hard as the next one, after you have done this duty that troubles you so much. What will you tell her then? How will you explain deception piled upon deception? The old lies have worn themselves out, Mr. Marlowe. Will you spin new ones for her?"

"What is it exactly that you want from me?" Ray demands, suddenly fierce. To sacrifice this child to the

Whiston reputation? Write him off as a lost investment? The conversation has spiraled beyond his comprehension, and he's tired of sparring with her. "I'm not going to ignore what he's done."

"I do not *want*. I only observe, and give guidance where it might be needed."

"You call this guidance."

"I do what is good for the family."

"And it's good, covering up murder?" He has no doubt that she can do this. All she has to do is give the word.

But her expression is not victorious, not full of satisfaction or gloating. Only a sort of dim, brooding recognition. "I wonder what your priorities are, and I believe that they are not sufficiently clear to me because you haven't made them clear to yourself. Two poles, duty and affection. You have feelings for Emma, that is plain, good and honest feelings. I observe that and find it to be good. Good but fragile. It could not weather a storm such as the one you devise."

Now he sees where she's going. It leaves a taste in his mouth like bile. "And if I play nice, if I don't embarrass the family by doing something crass like having Freddy arrested and charged with murder, in return you'll put in a good word for me."

"If it is Emma Whiston that you want, you must want her above all. Above duty and friendship, loyalty to your profession, dedication to all that has pushed you to this place and this time. You cannot have Emma and anything else. It is Emma *or* those other things. To love her, to cling to her, is to accept the destruction of all else that has made you who you are. The family demands it. Emma's nature demands it."

"That is the sickest thing I've ever heard."

Amah cocks her head to the side, considering him. Like he's pathetic, moronic. "Tell me, Mr. Marlowe, is it worse than a man who knows that a ship bearing twelve thousand souls is imperiled, knows, but chooses to forsake everyone and everything else except this handful of survivors? To save a handful when he could have made another choice, gone to another deck, where the people were congregated, and shared with them their need to flee?"

He restrains the urge to growl at her, feral like a dog. "Security was handling the evacuation. By the time it became clear that their plan was going awry, it was too late to change course. We were already on our way to your deck."

"But it was still our deck that you came to first. Emma's deck. It is all a matter of perspective, you see? With access to some facts, you are named a hero. With access to others, some might deem your choices selfish, cruel, evil. Which facts would you have them understand?"

"You're asking me to just let it go. Pretend like it never happened."

But Amah shakes her head, like he's given exactly the wrong answer. "I am not trying to offend your sensibilities of justice. I only advise you to wait, to attempt to understand. To spare you from difficult days ahead. So much more difficult than they would have to be, if you would but see clearly."

"What am I not seeing? You of all people should know something about the complications of conflicting responsibilities. He killed one of the children in your care, for God's sake."

It was a low blow, beneath him really. He can't help himself. He's standing in the middle of an emergency

podship discussing Whiston family politics, how to maintain a decent family image, while the catastrophic wreckage of a Goliath class starship is still cooling in their wake.

And all Amah cares about is drunk, pathetic Frederick. About saving his ass, and knowing she can pull it off.

That's the galling bit. Not just that she can do it, that she intends to do it, but that she wants him to agree with her.

"Indeed," Amah says, almost solemnly. "But you speak of responsibilities, even those diametrically opposed, in terms of 'must', of 'ought', of imperatives. You cannot hold these opposites, eh? You must choose one or the other. You say duty, you 'must' do your duty. I say there is no imperative but food, shelter, protection, progression--what is called family when we divest ourselves of selfishness. Everything else is aesthetic. I discharge no responsibility for its own sake. That is the lesson you're missing. Always you should be asking yourself which are the *right* responsibilities, the true needs, the greater good, not merely the ones that you have been told 'must' be done. Sometimes the individual is sacrificed for the common good; sometimes the common good spares the individual from just retribution.

"Ask yourself who you serve. When you know that, you'll know all other things."

In other words, exact anything like justice against Frederick and you lose Emma. Exact revenge--frex, catching him in a secluded place and popping a shell into his brainpan--and you lose Emma. Micah or Emma, but not both. Amah simply will not allow it.

Ray doesn't have the energy to argue with her. He doesn't have the ammunition to argue with her, either. She's exactly right. There's nothing he can do.

Not right now, at least.

She accepts his silence as something akin to acquiescence, and softens her expression. Not unlike patting a puppy on the head right after you've beaten its ass for pissing on the rug.

"I offer you my apologies, Mr. Marlowe. It has been a trying day for you, I know. The loss of so many friends is difficult to bear. I had only hoped to share with you what it means to embrace and in turn to be embraced by a frontier colony like New Holyoke. It is a different world than the one you have known, and I would like to prepare you for it, to ease your transition from one life to another."

Leave me alone, Ray thinks, and ambles away, out of her line of sight, which also unfortunately means away from Emma. But he's done with her. He can't bear any more of her concept of responsibility.

He sleeps.

His body forces it upon him, drops a warm, suffocating comforter over his thoughts, attaches lead weights to his eyelids. He is unconscious in the impact couch without even bothering with the restraints. He has debts of fatigue that he's been charging against his body that it will take days to fully repay.

And asleep, he dreams, and knows that he is dreaming.

First of heartbeats, hot and damp, that do not pound with the mechanical rhythm of muscle and churning fluids, but doppler near, then away in wide, parabolic arcs like the rush of a centrifuge. It pushes against his flesh like negative pressure, puffs directly from the breath of God. An alternating, staccato thrum that moves

in counterpoint to his own, thrumming, thundering pulse. Then shifts, stumbles, sounds the echo in his chest like an ancient sloop exploring a foreign bay, and slowly rises until they beat together, heart to heart.

The clamor fills his ears, vibrates through flesh and bone, rattles cellular walls until they gather themselves together, fall into lockstep with this new rhythm, this organic temblor. A clapper in a cosmic bell ringing through aeons he flickers past and through without notice.

And the tone of the bell is a voice, resonant, skittery, like the hum of bees, and it says to him: *Brother*. Again. *Brother*. The sound is the universe, the roar of singularities warping gravity, bending space and time, weaving itself into the fabric of matter and being.

Brother.

He is a seed, a kernel of a greater unknown, a shimmering spark tossed into darkness by a fountain of light that is both blinding and without illumination. A spark in dimension, but out of context. Inside, when it should be outside, plummeting through dark and cold and empty.

A seed, round of body, velocity bent like a teardrop, plunging into a thick and clinging murk that is somehow more frigid. But not a bottomless murk like an Arctic sea--subterranean. A labyrinth of passages, of spirited, trackless turns where luminous eyes watch, wide and staring and grand. They mumble as he passes, the sound is the rapid buzz of fluttering aluminum foil against the roof of his mouth, impenetrable, but understood.

Brother.

No longer a sleek and vibrant spark; he is vast, a thing of bulging, black eyes and sinuous body, many flippered and spatulate limbed. Leviathan, he swims through the channels of the deep. Below the seas, below the continents, plowing through tracks where none but his own kind have been. Paths that are black water, rimmed with stone where cool, rotten slime grows, where jagged spars cut his sides and nick his tail. Paths that become mud chilled almost to freezing, mud that coats his skin, strangles him like a second self, tastes of caves and decay. Rising. He is rising from netherworld of deep to land and sky.

Brother.

And he is boiling in brackish water, a spiral, dizzying circle like the depth of a well which he cannot ascend. He floats, he thrashes his long and mighty limbs, always in motion, never moving, peering through water toward light that trembles like the reflection of the moon on rippling waves. But below him is a surge of heat, a volcanic vent rumbling superheated exhaust, billowing the massive sail of his body toward the light, toward a surface he cannot see, cannot guess.

But he rises.

Rises toward the stone, tall and sleek and ebony. Carved with figures rent from meaning, forms without context.

Brother.

He hears and he rises.

Chapter Two

The podship scuds against atmosphere, triggering a battery of deceleration thrusters; but this is a fine ship, not a minimum-contract drop can. She rumbles, sending a perceptible shiver through the hull plating, but then it's just like dropping into a vat of molasses, a sense of pressure and a slight tilt forward. She rights herself almost at once, recalibrating her systems for a smooth, stressless entry.

Ray is awake again and grateful for it after muzzy dreams. Even more grateful for the fact that it was Emma, splendid and winking who shook him out of his nightmares rather than a bloated and inkstained Amah, who probably would have sent him into fits of screaming. As it is, he's just pleased he didn't snap out of the couch and belt Emma across the chin before he knew what he was doing.

Messed up, that was what it was. Bad dreams. A combination of horror and exhaustion and guilt...and maybe the fact that he went to sleep with a supernatural being fluttering around in his breast pocket.

It is a messed up world in which a man has so many other things going on that he forgets about a demigod.

Oh, he's solved that problem now.

Ray takes his eyes off the control panels in the pilot's cabin (panels that he wouldn't touch if his life depended on it) and gives Nomar a sidelong glance. The rat is hopping along on his hind legs, exploring the scatter of lights across the boards as various systems spring to life, perform whatever tasks it is they were created for, then click themselves off again.

Nomar took the ring from his fingers with an avid interest when he offered it. Rolled it around between shining paws, blinking at it with red eyes. He snuffled it with his nose, detected God only knows what, then at Ray's request, dumped it into the secure compartment Nomar used for storing hazardous materials, assorted explosive or unstable elements or radioactive curiosities. It was the safest place Ray could think of.

Now, the podship thunders across midnight terrain he can't see in the darkness. A poor 3-dem rendering on one of his display screens--all amber lines and topographical banalities--suggests water below, or extremely disinteresting and featureless land. It reminds him vaguely of skimming over the desert in a Predator on late night combat raids, visor on his command helmet down while he takes one final look at the mission specs. The desert was largely a loose, roughly concentric mishmash of curved lines on his display then, too, with the Predators replicated as amorphous blips zipping across it.

"Okay," Lieutenant Kato says to him over the radio. "We're tracking you coming in at just over a thousand knots. Your angle is good; deceleration tubes are operating in the green; all of your systems read normal. Hull shielding and heat dampers are functioning as advertised. You're just over five hundred kilometers out, Ray, so we're going to shed some velocity over the ocean, then roll you inland a grid or two and bring you in under impulse midway between the tower and the Whiston hangar. EED has shut down traffic in and out of the field while we collect the podships, so you've got nothing to worry about."

"You keep saying that," Ray answers. You keep saying it, but you have no idea.

"I just want you relax a little. We've got things under control."

"I'm hoping so. There are lots of lights and switches and levers up here. It's a little disorienting, frankly, so if you're expecting me to push or tug anything, you're going to have to give me plenty of notice."

Nervous. "Um, we'd really prefer it if you didn't touch anything at all."

"I'm glad we agree, then."

"Our plan is to acquire control of your shipboard systems at the two hundred kilometer marker, where we'll start your swing around. I'll let you know when that happens."

"Really, no. Thanks, but don't. I'll be happy if you just let me know when we're on the ground."

Kato barks with laughter. "I thought you Marines were supposed to be intrepid."

"We are. On the ground."

Lieutenant Kate stops chattering at him as they make their final approach, skimming in low over thick stands of timber. Fast growing, oxygen rich pine, he's been told, planted by the first settlers nearly a hundred years ago to augment New Holyoke's breathable, but thin atmosphere. From the viewing port, it's just a blot of darkness pierced in spots by eruptions of stone like islands in a vast sea.

Ahead, Ray can see the white glow of Blackheath Grange, a sprawling tumble of incandescence that casts a gray haze against the clouds gathered thickly overhead. This is what human beings do, he thinks. They drop themselves on a virgin world, and the first thing they set about doing is throwing up a mantle of light pollution against the stars, closing off the vault of the sky as if they seek to forget how small a thing mankind really is. Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gave it to man as a blow against insignificance. And humanity never forgot the power of its illusion. Like ostriches, burying their collective heads in the glittering sand.

For just a moment, looking at the undifferentiated shine and glare of a new, alien city, he gets that old thrill, a sort of swelling in his chest. This is the way he felt the first time he climbed off the plane, heavy rucksack in tow and rifle slung over his shoulder, and touched his feet to New Mesopotamian sand. Or his initial visit to Bangkok for his first real military leave. Something akin to the raw sensation that accompanied his first glimpse of Stratiskaya Daransk and Castor's Nuvex City and even the distant, holo projected glimpse of long-abandoned Archae Stoddard. New worlds, strange locales and exotic experiences, ripe with possibility or adventure, even with peril. This is impressive currency for a man who did his growing up in small town Indiana where things never change and you grow old with the kids you went to kindergarten with. There's always the sense that even looking out on these places that you're not really there, that it isn't your experience, but a body and thoughts and sensations that belong to someone else and which you are just borrowing for a few, precious instants.

A tap, and the cabin door opens. Ray cranes his neck to see, but the back of his seat is too tall, and before he can get out of his restraints, Emma is beside him. She leans down beside the flight chair, between its padded arms and the nav panel to his right, sharing his view through the nose of the ship.

"You're supposed to be strapped in," he says, though he isn't sorry she has come. There was something inevitable in her arrival, and he'd just as soon get things out of the way now as wait until later, when New Holyoke embraced her again, immersing her in complications. "We'll be touching down in a few minutes."

She turns her face partly toward him, as though to acknowledge the fact that he has spoken to her, but keeps her eyes on the horizon. "You worry too much."

"There are a million things that could go wrong. I don't want you to get hurt."

"Now you're insulting my family. This is a Whiston Corp Sanctuary Model podship. The best emergency craft ever designed by human engineering and computer augmentation. It's guaranteed not to tolerate

malfunctions."

He shrugs. "Accidents still happen, especially when EED ground control overrides the splendid engineering of your autopiloting systems. I'd feel better if you were strapped in."

Emma groans, but instead of leaving, she drops onto his lap, scoots provocatively up the curve of his thighs so that her legs dangle part over his, part between them. She drags his arms around her shoulders and holds them there with her hands on top of his. She leans against him, her head against his cheek. Even for Emma, this strikes him as a bold maneuver. A statement so profound it sucks the breath from his lungs.

"There," she says. "You can hold me until we're on the ground. Safe enough?"

"Sure. No complaints from this peanut gallery."

"I didn't think so."

For a time, they continue their long glide in, and Ray watches in silence, enjoying Emma's glow and presence. He picks out the gradual swell of the terrain, down from the gritty highlands where the groves of trees march across virgin fields like kudzu. In the dark and at their altitude, the irregular undulations of terrain block his view of the sea beyond the Grange, but he thinks at times that he can find the narrow gorge where the river runs down from the mountains he cannot name to the bay. He doesn't remember what Kato called the river, either, though they paralleled its course for a few kilometers.

Eventually, when it becomes clear that nothing exciting is going to happen outside the viewing screens, but that something either exciting or annoying is going to happen on this side of them if he lets the silence linger, he says, "How are you doing?"

"I wanted to ask you the same thing."

"I'm fine," he says, dismissive. "I'll be better when we're finally down."

He tries to smile for her, but wry is the only expression he has handy. "Now, how are you feeling?"

"Strangely."

"Not exactly revelatory, but I understand."

"Is it wrong to feel ambivalent about a homecoming?"

"I couldn't tell you if it's wrong. I *can* tell you that it's normal, at least the way I mean it. What feels so strange to you?"

"I don't know, honestly. Part of me is joyous, bursting--despite everything else. The ship, your friends, all of that." She shakes her head, as though she can jar the memories of Kilgore and blood into a darker corner where they can be forgotten. "Whatever it might lack, Blackheath Grange is home, and I've been gone what seems like forever. It is much more a home to me than Terra. I don't have any connections to the planet where I was born. Father insisted that we be born Terran, for the citizenship, so the Board couldn't use our extra-terrestriality against us or our descendents. He was sensitive to that, you know, because he felt like he had been cut off from proper succession by his Holyokan birth."

"I didn't realize such things mattered."

"In some circles, Ray, where you're from is paramount. What do you think the Lilaikens are going on about? Terrocentrism is the new class system."

"And that's why you're not completely happy? Because New Holyoke is a backwater frontier world and now you're stuck here again? No matter how much it might feel like home."

She's silent for a time, like she's agreeing with him. Then, in a small voice, she says, "It wasn't New Holyoke I was running away from."

Because it's on his mind, he responds: "I won't let Frederick hurt you any more, Emma."

But she shakes her head fiercely, violently. "Not Frederick, either. It's...complicated, idiotically complicated sometimes. Because I love it here, Ray. There's that large piece of me that can't wait to get on the ground, to stroll down the Rue de Saxon, where all the fine shops are, peering into windows at new dress designs. To climb the spanning arch of the Ten Founder Bridge over the Coda, down near the bay where it becomes wide and shallow. From the height of the bridge, you can see all of the Grange, from cliffs to harbor. There is so *much* here, Ray, so much life and potential and interest. Intelligent, vibrant people defining themselves and our future every day, with small steps of creativity and ambition, each one a new thing, a new identity that takes us that much farther from the cultural juggernaut of Terran influence. With each day that passes, we become less Terran and more Holyokan."

"But?"

"Yes, *but*. I'm not a little girl any more. I don't have time for wonder and awe and potential. I have responsibilities and expected contributions and reporters who will follow me with Eyelenses and flotillas of digital recorders. Always wanting to know where I go, what I buy, who I visit, as though they can scry the economic and social future of the colony from my spending habits. It's too heavy, Ray. It's too much to bear. I don't want my life to mean anything more than anyone else's."

"You ran away because you wanted to be normal," Ray says gently. "There's nothing wrong with that. I don't think anyone comes pre-programmed to be a celebrity--or in your case, an icon."

"Did I tell you that when I was on Strat, I could go for weeks at a time without anyone recognizing me? I went to restaurants sometimes, or libraries. I sat in the Student Commons. I struck up conversations which strangers. No one knew me." But she shakes her head again, this time wearily. "You don't understand what it means to be a Whiston. Not a corporate, Terran Whiston, but blood and bone and root Whiston. That's what I didn't want. As I said, it wasn't New Holyoke I was fleeing. It was *destiny*. The destiny the great Whiston clan has defined for me. I just didn't run fast enough."

"And instead, you found me." It was an outrageous thing for him to say.

"I found you, yes."

Ambivalent, even about that, he thinks. He doesn't know how to decipher her mood.

"Don't sound so excited about it, Miss Whiston. You'll give me a big head."

But there's no banter in her, no play. She scans the shimmering horizon with something like dread in her eyes and a thin crease to her lips. It's more than just family ties and responsibilities, he suspects. She's touched on this before, obliquely, bitterly even, but never this way, this intensely.

Maybe it's a matter of proximity, of perceived reality. The old life and its patterns were still just a memory

aboard *Paraclete*. Vague threats that still had no actual substance. Now the duration of her fleeting escape could be measured in minutes, seconds, like the end of a dream.

Or more likely, he supposes this could be a delayed expression of her own horror over the *Paraclete* disaster, but he knows better. Just as he feels it, *Paraclete* is still too big for her, maybe will always be too big. She comes from a frontier colony, for God's sake, has never thought about population on a Terran scale, where twelve thousand deaths are a tragedy, but a small thing in the grand scheme. One minor neighborhood in a your average Eastern seaboard megalopolis.

Someone whose entire world runs less than a million people--hell, probably less than five hundred thousand--couldn't even begin to grapple with a disaster of *Paraclete's* magnitude.

"You're angry with me," he says at last.

"Yes."

"Because I lied to you when I said I was a systems vet. And because I kept lying to you. You have every right to be angry, Emma. I'm sorry."

It would be a petty thing to explain further, to blame the job and duty and codes of silence, so he doesn't.

Quietly, she says, "I don't know who you are."

"Yes, you do. I'm exactly who you think I am, just the details are different."

"You came to my room with guns, covered in blood."

Those are, he must admit, pretty significant details. "I am a Commander with a special unit of the FSA known as the Criminal Investigations Unit. We covertly infiltrate EED starships and FSA Security installations in an attempt to combat terrorist organizations like the Lilaiken movement, to neutralize them before they can cause any harm. That was my assignment aboard *Paraclete*. That's what I was doing when we met that evening outside Madame Trusseau's theater. When Micah was murdered, I assumed control of the investigation at the request of Security Chief Becker and Commander Sorensen.

"Part of those duties involved performing significant surveillance on your brother, who we felt was a reasonable suspect given his connection to the victim. It was the Captain's contention that at the very least, it was our also our duty to seek to provide evidence of his non-involvement because of the potential political ramifications."

He kills that thread there, before he's tempted to lie to her, and hopes she won't ask for more. There's nothing else he can say without destroying her or expecting her to believe him solely on his word alone, right after he's finished apologizing to her for weeks of lies.

So he doesn't try. It's better this way, at least for now.

"And that's the truth?" she says archly.

"Yes."

"You track down terrorists and you kill them. That's your job."

"Yes." On the plus side, this does not seem to disturb her.

"So did you think I was a terrorist, Ray?"

"Um, no."

"Then you thought I might be Micah's murderer."

"No. Of course not."

"Then why couldn't you just have told me the truth? Maybe not right away, but eventually. Before you showed up at my door covered in blood." She glares at him, chin elevated, primed for offense. "Unless you just didn't trust me."

"Because it isn't done, Emma. It's not the way the business works. I had your brother under surveillance! There was more to consider than just my personal feelings."

"But certainly not my feelings. That wasn't part of your investigation, I take it."

"The job had nothing to do with the reasons why I kept coming back to you." Which is a nice thing to say, he realizes, a true thing, but there's no way he can make her believe him. He shrugs, frustration or surrender.

"Does that sound pathetic?"

"Complicated," she answers. "Not pathetic. And it doesn't make me any less angry."

"I wasn't trying to use our relationship to further my investigation."

She exhales sharply. "But you weren't above such things, either."

"No."

"You're a very bad man." He's afraid she's going to leave it there, just condemn him and be done with it. It's what he deserves. "But you're forgetting two vital points, Ray. I was the one who sought you out, if you'll recall, so saying that you may or may not have exploited our burgeoning relationship for your own ends is at the very least inaccurate, and may, in fact, be more than a little chauvinistic. Secondly, the end result that you're losing sight of is that what you really were attempting to accomplish with all your sneaking around and backroom dealing was the protection of the Whiston family interests. You were protecting me, however obliquely, and that has got to be worth something."

Except for the fact that he's done no such thing. Other than realize that he's impotent. *Well, I was going to shatter the world as you know it, but Amah convinced me that it was a bad idea. Oh, and that I didn't really have a choice in the first place. Thanks for thinking so well of me, though.*

But she smiles, a sort of grimly satisfied little smirk that is neither completely pleased nor totally unhappy. Complicated. "Not to mention, of course, that your elevated rank will make much more acceptable tabloid fodder for those people who obsess over the identity and credentials of the man who appears with me socially. Averaging your good intentions and your bumbling execution together, I'd say we come out just about even, if not a little ahead."

"A little ahead?"

"As long as you promise me that there will be no more lies between us."

He sees it, tracks it, watches the last decent opportunity to drop the bomb of truth pass him by.

"I don't understand you at all," he says.

"I told you, Ray. I have, in fact, told you repeatedly--I am beyond your comprehension."

"No. You're perfect."

"And you're just saying that because you believe I've let you off the hook."

"Maybe."

She laughs at him, and this time, finally, there's nothing but pleasure in the clear tones of her voice. "You're not off the hook at all, but the remaining questions are things we don't have time for at the moment. But you should be thinking about your answers, because I will most certainly consider them to be part of your final examination."

"Really? Like what?"

"Like why your young Marines were both wearing rings like the one you gave me, and what that has to do with the disaster aboard the ship."

He swallows. "Fair enough. But you're right, we don't have time for that now."

He glances at her fingers, and for the first time notices that they are bare. "You're not wearing it now."

Emma sucks in a breath, embarrassed. She reaches up and pulls a fine, gold chain from around her neck, where it had been tucked into the front of her shirt. The ring dangles from it like a pendant.

Ray says, "I told you to wear it."

"Amah wouldn't let me. She said it wasn't proper; that I should give it back to you."

Screw Amah, he thinks. He has a sudden sensation of dread, of a disaster narrowly averted. It makes him want to vomit.

He says, "What else? What are the other questions?"

"There will be the matter of your future plans, now that you're adrift on the frontier. That is an issue of some importance."

"I'm working on that, though I'm sure EED will have some input in the decision-making process. Is that it?"

She tosses her head, mimicking frustration. "That, darling, is just the beginning."

"Of course it is."

Then she's serious again, lower lip caught up between her teeth. "I shouldn't be like this, Ray. It's selfish and shameful to be thinking about New Holyoke, about you and me, about petty things." She looks down at her hands, as if she still expects to find blood on them. "I haven't even told you how sorry I am about your friends. He saved my life--Kilgore, I mean. And then there was nothing I could do for him."

"He knew what he was doing. They both did."

The podship banks right, a gentle shift that presses them together, and the airfield heaves into view just beyond a regimented line of tall pines, marking the boundary of the forest. It perches atop the broad cliffs that hold Blackheath Grange in their embrace, an expanse of glare and tarmac, concrete and glass. Aircraft cluster beneath the open sky like sleek insects crowded around the fat curve of hangars, squat maintenance buildings, administrative terminals. Runways, glideways, momentum strips poke the scrubby flatlands like obscenely appendaged extra limbs. Elevated launching pads sprout around the tower compound like toadstools basking in the sun. Everything is light, white constant and red blinking, sterilizing metal and stone, plastisheen and concrete.

"There," Emma says, pointing to a gathering of bubble-strobed emergency vehicles, skittering pedestrians, flashbulb Eyelens monitoring devices that erupt at the sight of the podship like bursts of gunfire. "Already waiting for us. You'll stand close to me, won't you, Ray? When we disembark, I mean. Keep the predators at bay."

"I will."

The distinct sense of trepidation returns, knotting her shoulders. She grips his arms as though she's on the verge of panic. "I should tell you, before it becomes impossible. I've spoken to Amah, and she agrees that you should plan to stay in our guest house for the first several days. It will spare you the attentions of the media for a time. That is, assuming you have no other place to go."

He hadn't even thought about it, but the offer doesn't surprise him. Amah wants to keep him close, where he's more easily observed, maybe more readily controlled. "Okay. I mean, I'm grateful for the offer, but I don't know that your brother will share your enthusiasm."

At least that's honest.

"He will if he knows what is good for his reputation. It will spin like a display of gratitude to our noble rescuer. That's the least that will be expected of us, believe me."

Spin. She's already thinking about the tabloids. Just like Amah.

For himself, Ray is just happy for the excuse to be near her.

He looks down on the congregation awaiting them, their cameras and questions, microphones and listening devices, thinking that it is indeed a different world to which he has just been invited.

Chapter Three

His first day on New Holyoke, he sleeps. Exhausted, insensate, dreamless, with Nomar curled up at his feet and blankets soft as silk wadded around him like burial shrouds. He sleeps until the despair is gone, the aches are dulled, the horror dissipates, and when he wakes, he is empty, like an urn that has been hung upside down, its contents spilled across the ground, full of nothing but darkness and echoes and air.

Ray immediately considers this to be an improvement.

Golden light slants through the cottage windows in a way that suggests afternoon and autumn, the scent of dried leaves and dust. He lays still for a time, letting the sunlight bake against his hands and arms, staring at the ceiling as though he can't remember where he is, who he is, what he's supposed to be doing or thinking.

But it comes back, all of it. Too soon, in fact, and he feels himself adrift.

The house doesn't help, this place the Whistons call their guest cottage, tucked down a white pebbled path, inside the walled fortification of the family estate on the outskirts of Blackheath Grange. He only saw glimpses of it last night on the interminable ride through the city in sleek, dark family vehicles like limousines with windows tinted so darkly the streetlights were little more than opaque smudges. They slewed from street to street with him unable to get his bearings, unable to recognize landmarks, even only vaguely aware when they crossed over the river. It wasn't even like being in a strange city--it was being in a strange city that he knew nothing about, an imaginary place about which there was no record.

Then there had been the bustle of their arrival through the security gates, a dozen domestics to meet them at the door. Some to shuffle sleepy-eyed children off to their new beds and strange surroundings; others taking Emma by the arm and leading her off to see her mother; still more reporting changes, updates, essential household information to Amah and relating that they'd heard from the family physician already about Frederick's admission to the medical facility. Ray had assimilated all of this information with something less than optimum clarity. He was too busy being introduced to a sullen faced gentlemen who seemed prone to speak about as often as Nomar, held himself stiffly and marched them along the path sprinkled with low, dim cones of illumination around the house, through a tangle of wilderness and around to the cottage.

They called it a cottage, these nutty Whistons, but to Ray's cramped-ship and tent city sensibilities, it was immense--easily as large as the tumbledown farmhouse in which he'd grown up with mother and father and three brothers and an endless succession of friends, neighbors, the stray uncle and cousin or three.

Ray listens to the silence, the lack of thrust rumble, the absence of feet pounding the deckplate outside his door. If he strains, there is sound: the rustle of wind through fat leaves, the tick of tree branches against the outside wall, the slide and rustle of his own skin against the sheets. The silence is thunderous, ominous.

He wonders what time it is, and thinks about the possibility of being hungry.

After awhile, he rouses himself, wincing through the reintroduction to a cascade of bruises and scrapes, aches and bullet furrows. He examines each of these injuries in turn, comes to the assessment that none of them are very serious at all, then gathers his trousers from the untidy pile on the carpet next to bed and slides them on. Next the shirt, socks, boots. He digs through the tall wardrobe cabinet against one wall. There are drawers on one side and a locking cabinet on the other where he could hang suit jackets if he had any, but since he doesn't, he instead tosses in the tac harness he's worn since leaving *Paraclete* and pockets the key. An actual key, interestingly enough, with teeth. Fascinating as an antique curiosity, but not exactly secure. But it's the best he can do.

Ray makes a brief circuit around the room, acquainting himself. There's a narrow door off to one side that opens on a small restroom. Sink, toilet, shower and a linen closet with fresh towels and guest toiletries. More tables and bureaus and cabinets that contain either nothing at all or interesting little banalities like pens and writing tablets. All of these items are old, finely crafted and meticulously maintained--the sort of things Ray used to find in his grandmother's house when he was still young enough that he was supposed to look without touching.

He traces the baseboards along the half-paneled walls, looks behind innocuous landscape paintings and mirrors, moves a couple of wing-backed leather chairs, scuffing the carpet in the process. He does not find the one thing that he's looking for, that being a data terminal. Neither terminal nor ports, not even ancient hub jacks.

Ray steps back toward the center of the room considering this, blinking at the oddity. It feels as though he's just lost access to half his brain.

There's a knock at the door.

Not a ping, not a buzz, not a greeting daimon. A knock. Knuckles on wood.

The door opens a moment later, which is probably for the best, since Ray wasn't exactly sure at first what to do about this whole knocking business.

A young man, dark-skinned, with plaited hair ducks his head inside. He sees Ray standing there, tilts his head casually, like a nod, and swings the door wide.

"Commander Marlowe?"

"Yes."

"I thought I heard you moving around. I'm Jagiri Oh-Kar."

"Okay."

"I work for the family. Amah asked me to keep an eye out for you, since you're new to the colony. Acquaint you with things, you understand. See to any needs you might have."

Ray rubs his hand across his face, still trying to sort things out. "That's good. I seem to be a little bewildered at the moment." He takes one last look around the room. "Is there a data terminal I can access? Something linked to the global net?"

Jagiri gives him a big smile, all teeth. "Amah said you might ask for such things. There's a communication center at the manor house that you can use, but I suspect you'll be disappointed with the facilities. We don't have much of a global net here."

"Don't have?"

"I don't know what you've heard about New Holyoke, Commander, but we're probably somewhat rustic compared to what you're used to. We have a pretty modern communication infrastructure between the Port Authority ring and the ground, and the mining operation has a pretty broad net, too, but other than that, we're strictly backwater out here. Most of our information outside the colony comes in as dispatches from starships or leaks from the EED installation, which *is* pretty wired from what I understand."

Ray grapples with this concept for several seconds, but it's slippery and seems to defy his best efforts to get his mind around it.

"We have newspapers," Jagiri offers hopefully, "if you're just wanting to catch up on local events. I just finished thumbing through today's edition. I can bring it up to you. You might be interested to know that your arrival last night made the front page."

"Um, no."

"You're quite the hero around here, if I might say so, sir. Saving the entire family from the starship, I mean."

Ray waves him off. "Really, that's enough. You're creeping me out looking at me like that."

"Like what, sir?"

"Like that. That whole wide-eyed thing and calling me 'sir'. Let's move on to something else. I'll find my own way to access the network grid."

The young man shrugs, still too entirely pleased with himself or with Ray or their encounter in general. "I have some messages for you."

"Fine."

"A Colonel Ritchie from EED has flared you about a dozen times today. He says he would really like to speak with you as soon as possible." Jagiri hesitates momentarily, then grins again. "He seems to be becoming increasingly impatient with the delay."

Which makes sense, Ray figures, given the fact that he more or less blew off the security escort that attempted to intercept him at the airfield last night. "What else?"

"Four tabloid reporters would like interviews. Two vid companies, too. They're outside the gates now in big trundles, waiting for you or one of the Whistons to emerge."

"Screw them. Is that it?"

"Miss Whiston has asked that you come to dinner this evening at the manor. She said you would want to know that the invitation is not a personal one, but a formal one, and that she understands completely if you wish to decline."

"I don't know what that means."

Jagiri gives him a slight, conspiratorial wink. "It means that this isn't a family dinner, but an event. A few strenuously selected members of the press will attend. Friends, of course, but still media. They'll want to meet you. She's giving you fair warning."

"But declining the invitation would be bad form, is that what you're saying?"

"Yes."

Rats.

Continuing, Jagiri says, "Miss Whiston anticipated that you'd see it that way. She asked me to run out and

pick up a few items for you this morning--appropriate clothing, I mean. I estimated your sizes from the clothes you arrived in."

"Great." If it was possible to sound less enthusiastic, Ray would have found it. "What time is now...in Terran standard if you know it."

"Just after six o'clock ante meridian."

"Local time?"

"Thirteenth Hour. We run a twenty-eight hour day. That makes it about the middle of the afternoon by your reckoning."

Ray chews his lip. "And dinner?"

"Twentieth hour. So if you'd like to discharge your responsibilities with Colonel Ritchie beforehand, I can arrange a discreet vehicle and we can be back in time for you to change. If nothing else, having the dinner party to attend will give you an excuse to leave."

"I don't think the EED really gives a rat about the Whiston social calendar."

The grin, the teeth. "You might be surprised, sir."

"You're right. I probably would be."

Which for some reason, doesn't please him at all. But he has things to do, not the least of which is finding out what, if any, progress has been made on the rescue efforts. Ray whistles for Nomar, who pops his head above the bed's footboard at once and hops over to him in anticipation.

"Let's get this over with."

Jagiri's idea of a discreet vehicle is a heavily armored mobile that bears strong resemblance to a military surplus Prowler. The tires are wide, knobby and well worn. The chassis sits high above the ground, so he has to climb up into the passenger seat. It's coated in thick ocher dust from hood to tailgate, like it's just been hauled back from hard duty in a mining canyon. He would, however, be more impressed if they'd thought to leave intact the fifty caliber machine gun and its swiveling turret. Instead, there's a second row of bench seats and a long cargo bed.

Parked in neat rows around the Prowler are the limousines from last night, a pair of sporty late model Manchiti Spiders, three passenger trundles with the words Whiston Charitable Trust stenciled on the side and rows of uninteresting, assembly line touring vehicles. Behind him, tucked inside the steel frame garage structure were motorcycles, ore tugs, off-road rec scampers, construction equipment.

It begins to occur to him that the Whistons are, in fact, bloody rich

Ray cranes his neck and peers out the open passenger window for at time. The sky is a pale, wintry blue, puffy with pinkish cumulous clouds. Vaguely Terran, but just a shade off, as though it's been scoured of deeper hues by the rough caress of the solar winds. The whole world seems bleached, shallow, lacking a dimension he can't properly identify. The wild grass that surrounds the paved area of the motor pool appears tough, but scraggly in a way that reminds him the heath on English moors. There are a few stunted trees and meandering

bushes nearby, their colors predominantly brown, wasted, like they've been subjected to a particularly noxious pesticide.

Or maybe it's just the air itself, he thinks, a curious and pungent scent that is both dusty and oily, like diesel fumes. He wonders if that's New Holyoke or the proximity of the mining operation.

He rolls his head around, away from the grassy waste and toward the manor house, where Emma's tower is all that peeks above the aesthetic berm that separates the manor house from the garage complex.

It was, indeed, a tower, just as she had said.

As they pulled up the long drive last night and she told him of things Whiston and New Holyoke, pointing out sights, she did not neglect the existence of her tower (or her previous insistence upon it) as part of her spitfire, hand-clutching introduction to her home.

Blackheath Grange was originally the name of the Whiston house on New Holyoke, a sprawling English Farmstead Revival structure built over a period of a decade from the native hard, gray stone that resembled (and may have been, for all Ray knew) slate, taken in whole slabs which had been carved from the bluffs which surrounded the town. Not a true Revival building, of course, due to the addition of the Faery Turret that stabbed skyward from its central courtyard--an obelisk of glowing white marble quarried from the same Arkansas hills that had supplied the raw materials to the Washington monument and cut to precise specifications by some of Terra's most renowned stonemasons. Beneath the summer sun, she had assured him, it achieved a warm, burnished hue that lent the impression that it had caught fire.

Small windows, dark porticoes, heavy ledges between floors, the Grange itself conjured images of rain and chilly winters flattened by an uncomfortable amount of snowfall. It reminded Ray of some feckless young woman's idealized version of a bunker, except that there were fluted Roman columns where there should have been machine gun nests and elegantly landscaped shrubberies where he would have placed sandbags.

The original structure appeared to have been a rough square, hollowed in the middle by the piazza, with a porticoed entrance and mountains of roof gables sprouting off in all directions like broken bottles atop a perimeter wall. Now there were wings slabbed along the eastern and western sides, ugly block-style dormitories for children of the Trust and the administrative facilities an enterprise like the Trust required.

When Fram Whiston, Emma's great-grandfather, was building the Grange and solidifying Whiston control of New Holyoke, there had been just the house and a cluster of pre-fab pressurized Quonsets for the workers he paid to come with him, later the miners and engineers with the latest in sonar subterranean mapping tech and portable laser quik-drill rigs who ran the Whiston-Holyoke Elements and Materials Corporation (WHELEMAT). For years, the house served as mining company headquarters, satellite comm hub and government statehouse. By the time the population had begun to explode and the settlers to arrive, the old folks were used to just calling the area in general after the name Fram had given his manor house. Most people were quick enough to realize that the house never had been part of the city anyway, but the city itself only a sort of organic growth attached to the house.

These days, when the scattered settler and mining habs came to town for supplies or to resolve assorted legal disputes or to entice the latest shipment of newbies out to their corner of frontier Bumfuck, the city was Blackheath Grange, and the house simply the Grange, and nobody who knew anything about polite conversation confused the two, though the Grange had long ago passed out of the public and administrative uses Fram may or may not have originally intended for it.

To hear Emma tell it, the history of the Grange was long, winding and romantic, possibly even an epic chapter in the Whiston tradition, inextricably linked with the raw and thrilling past of the New Holyoke colony itself.

House as metaphor for some as-yet-unrealized and prosperous future, or maybe not even a metaphor, but an oracle, a promise of things to come.

The story, radically paraphrased, went something like this: dead old Fram, patriarch of the New H Whiston clan endures the ego-shattering vote of no-confidence foisted upon him by a combination of hostile shareholders in the Whiston Corp, hostile Whiston elements (cousins and in-laws and mixed breed stormcrows more properly referred to as either sub-Whistons or pseudo-Whistons) and the corporate board of directors, resulting in the removal of just about every one of his actual company-guiding authorities. Relegated to the role of symbolic monarch, an economic prisoner in a labyrinth of his own family's design, he seeks out and procures a solitary dispensation from Forum cronies to have a mining go at the newly discovered New Holyoke mineral bonanza. This comes in the form of a colonial charter.

Largely in secret, Fram assembles forces loyal to himself (excluding all pseudo-Whistons, of course) and founds Whelemat on the sly as a sub-sub-sub-Whiston Corp tax shelter and flings them all aboard a fast moving starship into frontier exile. This is like five hundred men and their families and assorted possessions, all bankrolled by a black bag account the actual Whiston Corp probably is *still* not aware exists. Old, dead Fram's only opposition in this particular plan comes from his blushing, young bride of less than a year, who strongly resists being dumped into the far reaches of the galaxy. But because she is loyal and strong and shares the mental and emotional ouster-scarring visited upon her husband, she agrees to go along in the end.

Fram is determined to reward her steadfastness and to make her as reasonably happy on New H as she was back home, so as soon as the Quonsets go up, Fram produces the plans for the Grange, divides his laborers into miners and construction personnel and sets to work on the twin enterprises. Dashing romantic, this gesture is. Makes half the female population of the colony swoon, it is so romantic, and immediately fixes in the minds of the new colonists what a noble, caring and reliable man old, dead Fram Whiston truly is.

On this wave of popular support and devotion, Fram names himself the first official governor of New Holyoke, the first financial officer, recruiting agent, chief executive officer, etc., etc., and through his deep pockets and political connections almost single handedly ensures the early survival of the colony. Not that this is a Plymouth Rock sort of scenario by any stretch of the imagination. Interstellar shipping and commerce with the frontier is a well established routine, largely risk neutral, and anyone with Fram's deep pockets is bound to get anything he might want or need if he can pay the bill of lading.

In the following years, there is much excitement, much risk, everything going wrong at times except marauding bands of hostile indians, but in the end, there's the thriving city and settler habs springing up all over the planet and open migration that brings in something on the order of forty thousand fresh-faced colonists a year. New H is poised for the boom that Fram foresaw when he created Whelemat and built the Grange as a symbol of his determination to eke out a permanent settlement that would rival Strat and Orduvai and maybe even Mars, one day.

A grand, rough and tumble frontier tale about the values of brow-sweat and good companions and work ethic.

Blah, blah.

Because as Ray looked at the house, then down the slight rill into a city that, for all he could tell, was still trying to catch up to the Grange's implied opulence and solidity, he couldn't help but imagine the scene a different way. The great starship shedding low-orbital shuttles like gnats, the first footsteps on alien ground, the obligatory flag stabbed into the soil along the river's bank. Then here comes nutty, eccentric, insanely wealthy Fram Whiston, still psychically wincing from having his family bitch slap his business vision, and he assembles all of his well-purchased compatriots and their wives and their kids into a circle and says something like: *Okay, folks, I really want to tell you how pleased I am that you've decided to come along and have a go at this me. I can't tell you how much you mean to me, and hey, can we have a nice, old school 'rah, rah, rah'*

for our new business venture! Well, yes, but before we get to that part, and immediately after we set up your stuffy little pressure huts where we're going to stack you eight or ten deep, what I want to show you is the nifty plans I've drawn up for my personal palace! Gotta have it, you understand, because me and the little missus are not classless animals like you, and when we want to fuck, we want genteel surroundings to do our fucking in. So, long and the short of it is that you're going to spend the next ten years making sure I'm as happy and comfortable here as I was back on Terra! And maybe if you're lucky, and you work really hard to make me even more mindlessly wealthy than I already am, your kids or grandkids or more likely, your great-grandkids can one day have a house as nice as mine to fuck in, too!

And as he imagines the manor house rising up like a rotten tooth from the gums of this hilltop above the valley's alluvial plain and the incongruity between it and the slowly rusting huts, he thinks dead old Fram was probably shunted out of Whiston Corp power for a whole host of good reasons.

He was obviously quite the dumbass.

More than likely, the first New H colonists built him his house and jump started his rival mining corporation because it was their dream to do so, their dreams that brought them out across vast space, out of overcrowded Terran space and into the cosmic wastes. Fram gets the credit only because he was stupid enough to guarantee them goods and salaries and a risk-free stab at making themselves masters of a new world.

Looking at Emma's Faery Turret and wondering what she's doing right now, at this moment, Ray realizes that she probably doesn't see it happening the way he imagines it. Probably wouldn't appreciate his insight if he offered it.

So he looks away and rolls his window up.

Jagiri emerges from the garage, where he's been wrangling with the fleet clerk and assorted onlooking mechanics for the keys, and hoists himself up into cab. He snaps the assorted fission toggles, checks his gauges and engages the power train. The Prowler sets off away from the manor house along a graveled drive that wends back through the compound.

"Back gate," he explains, before Ray can even ask. "We use it primarily for deliveries, so it gets pretty regular traffic from heavy vehicles like the Prowler. And we've got the industrial camouflage going on, from the dust, I mean. You duck down a bit when we pull onto the access road just in case there's an enterprising reporter hanging about, though."

"You sound like you've done this before. Do the Whistons have to sneak out of the house regularly?"

"Not like every day, no. But often enough." Jagiri purses his lips, like it's an old aggravation. "It's not so bad as it used to be, so they tell me. When the colony was younger and the family more involved in the mining operation and the government, it was constant. Whiston on the front page every day, media always wanting comments on this and that. Since the Old Man passed, the attention has gotten less and less. Part of that had to do with Frederick and Miss Whiston being just children, so the local Board took over their roles for the most part. After that, there were just more people, new ones every month looking to mine or settle. It's not their *every* move that gets tracked anymore, just the big ones."

"Yikes."

"In some ways, I think it's worse now, despite what people say. Back then, people wanted to know what the Whistons had to say about policy, about trade and business. It was colony affairs, and everybody had a stake, or was looking for a little comfort when times got lean. But now it's private lives, a different sort of celebrity. They want to know what Mr. Whiston is reading, what he's spending his money on, which girl he's taking

around. They ask when Miss Whiston is going to marry and where she shops and what she thinks about the latest batch of Terran vids. It's nastier, if you know what I mean. There's no boundaries, just snooping, digging through the trash for things that are nobody's business."

"I guess celebrity has it's price."

"You'll find out, Commander Marlowe."

"Please stop calling me that. My name is Ray."

They approach the barred rear gate and Jagiri rolls them to a halt. He jumps out, opens the gate, then idles them through, leaps out again and closes the gate behind them. Ray slumps obediently in his seat while this is going on, though there doesn't appear to be anyone around to care about their exit.

When Jagiri starts them moving again, he straightens up and says, "You know, they make devices that will do that for you."

"You mean open the gates?"

"Yes."

The young man smiles like Ray has told a joke. They turn left toward the ocean onto a tarmac road lined on one side by the high compound wall and on the other with pine trees. A few kilometers on, they bounce onto a rutted track that begins a steep ascent up one arm of the escarpment that hems in Blackheath Grange.

"Let me explain something, Ray. New Holyoke is not Terra, okay? It's not starships and global networks and nanomech technology. Do you know why Amah asked me to show you around?"

Ray shakes his head.

"Because I was born off-world. I'm a Trust baby, grew up on Orduvai until I was about fourteen Terran years. My folks were Whiston Corp hardware designers, nav systems for starships. You know about Orduvai?"

"I know it's the headquarters for Goliath class ship manufacture. Because of the low grav."

"Exactly. And because of the low grav, it is an extremely tech advanced social system. I mean, you're not going to lure the top engineers and designers no matter what kind of compensation package you offer them, if part of the deal is that after two or three years on an Orduvai project, they suddenly find that they don't have the biological capability of going back home. So you've got to have sim grav to compensate, and that's no small undertaking, to build a whole dry dock installation that imitates Terran systems. So you've got all that tech infrastructure, and on top of that you've got bright folk who have to be entertained, stimulated, provided with research facilities, educational opportunities. Orduvai is like a gigantic think tank with all the technological gimcracks and jerry-candles to go along with it. That was the world that I knew before my parents passed away. It's the world you know, too."

At least, it's the world they *think* he knows. Ray doesn't correct him. "Go on."

"New Holyoke is a different space, both physically and intellectually. People migrate here because it's frontier. It's raw and basic and human in a way that Terra isn't anymore. Most people here still do most of their work with their own hands. Certainly, there've been automations and new technologies introduced into the mining end of things. We have weather satellites and the Port Authority and contact with the rest of human space, but the people who deal with those things are a highly segmented portion of the population, and even

they would tell you that they amount to a sort of necessary evil, at least in the short term. Until, you know, the colony is able to be more self-sufficient.

"That frontier mindset effects the way people think, Ray. We're different out here. In the things we expect, the things we do, the way we approach problems and issues and one another. People who come to New Holyoke and stay have chosen this lifestyle. They've turned their backs on a society driven by technology and machines and augmentation. They learn what it is to celebrate *being* rather than progressing. Around here, people call it being authentically human. You'll hear that tossed around from time to time, and eventually you'll get a handle on what it means. But it requires some adjustment, and I can help you with that. We've got similar past perspectives."

"We're all human," Ray says. "Technology has nothing to do with it."

Jagiri offers him the enigmatic grin. "You'll feel differently about that in a few weeks. Just wait and see."

They've topped the towering cliffs, and Ray can see the whole of the city beneath them, spread out like a jumble of tinsel, glimmering in the sun all the way down to the sea. Nearer is the Whiston estate, a broad wilderness space of open fields and clustered forests around which everything else crowds as though the city is a horde of barbarians attempting to breach the perimeter walls. There are ships in the harbor. Ships with canvas sails standing white and tall, taut in the breeze, and wakes that have nothing to do with fission driven propellers.

It occurs to Ray that he should probably invest some time wondering why Jagiri is expending so much effort to feed him a line of bull.

Except, of course, that he already knows. The absence of data jacks in the guest cottage explains it. Someone doesn't want him to have access to outside information, to keep him in an environment where he doesn't know what's going on, at least until he can be quantified into value that can be accurately measured.

Or is it actually something that Jagiri believes? Is authentic humanity part of his Trust education, inculcated as an explanation for whisking him away from the world he has known and into a foreign galaxy and a lifetime of indentured servitude to the Whiston family and the New Holyoke colony?

He says, "You know, fission powered vehicles are not very authentically human."

But Jagiri just laughs, throws his head back and slaps his knee. "Man, I didn't say it's about shunning technology. I'm a big fan of technology, of earth moving machines, of automobiles. My formal education is in geological engineering, friend. But there's a difference between technology and devices as tools, and adopting tech in such a way that it pushes us into a post-human philosophical experience. It's all about the body, Ray."

"You lost me."

"I'm talking about the song and the spark of the universe. The post-human experience is one in which we no longer know that basic truth."

Ray suspects, based on that criteria, that he was born post-human.

In his defense, he's tempted to bring up things like New H's bioengineered forestry program and agricultural advances. But he doesn't. He digs around for his mental list of polite responses, and when he can't find it, just nods. You don't slam another man's religious convictions just because they're nonsensical.

And he doesn't have time to get into it. They've made the full circuit of the highlands above the city along the

rutted track Jagiri insisted was a road, and now they pull onto the weathered stretch of tarmac that leads to the airfield. Jagiri talks them through the gatehouse security checkpoint, mostly by jabbing his thumb in Ray's direction and urging the squint-eyed guard to call ahead to EED for verification.

Eventually, the gate opens and they roll past the odd collection of hangars and solar planes, Port Authority shuttles and light combustion aircraft. They proceed past the terminal building and the tower, then beyond the Whiston hangar where the podship still sits, empty and forlorn, on a barren patch of concrete. Ray watches a weather observation plane skid down one of the long glideways and taxi toward the far end of the field.

They roll to a stop outside a whitewashed stone building, square and physically undistinguished. Three stories tall, with lots of windows and a simple pitched roof with green shingles. There's a decent perimeter area, all concrete and potential firing lanes and surrounded by a four meter tall chain link fence topped with razor wire. Off to the side, there's another building, an adolescent version of the first, with wide, yawning windows trimmed in military green. A complex sequence of yellow lines and painted arrows on the ground function as roadway delineations. Through the space between the buildings, Ray can see the ass end of a pair of personnel carriers parked in the motor pool. Beside the front gate is a small sign that identifies the enclosed space as the New Holyoke EED installation followed by a string of arcane identification digits that Ray supposes represent something meaningful to people who know about such things.

Jagiri gooses the Prowler off to the side so they're not blocking the entrance, then shuts the engine down. Ray shoves at the door and steps out, slamming the door behind him before Nomar can skitter after him, and before he is bound by social convention to see if the young Jagiri Oh-Kar wants to follow him inside.

"Watch him," he says to Jagiri through the window. "He's a very expensive piece of government property. And he's annoying."

The authentically human Jagiri glances suspiciously at the rat. Nomar, who has been more than likely following their conversation with some degree of attention, looks back at the young man with roughly the same degree of pleasure. Ray walks away.

He gives his name to the guard at the gate, a brusque private in olive drab, with a baseball-style hat and a holstered sidearm. The guy must have been told to expect him, because he doesn't ask questions or request Ray's id tags for verification, just snaps off a salute that is completely unnecessary since Ray is out of uniform and points out the exact location of the front door, which is all of about twenty meters from where they're standing.

God, how he loves the EED.

After the sun's white glare off so much naked concrete, he's blinded inside and stumbles his way through a succession of receptionists and secretaries before being led by a dowdy civvy matron in a dark skirt and floral print blouse through a series of narrow corridors, up two flights of stairs and into a corner office. It's a nice office, he thinks, once his eyes adjust. Big wooden desk, low bookshelves, plaques on the wall for various service awards, potted plants standing in the corners. Very neat, proper, squared away in a sort of lived in fashion rather than just spartan and workplace-like.

After a few minutes, the door opens and Colonel Ritchie enters. He's medium height, a little shorter than Ray, fortyish, sun-browned, with an iron gray buzzcut that makes him look grizzled. The Colonel is wearing his standard olive jacket with all the service bars and the dreaded golden birds shining on his collar. He brushes past without a word and crosses the room, all the time leafing through loose papers in a manila file folder.

He stops behind his desk, at the chair, but doesn't sit. Colonel Ritchie flops the folder down so that some of the loose papers fan out. Ray remembers to salute, judging from his reception that they like that kind of thing

around here. That's the problem with frontier military outposts. You can never tell if they're going to be strict discipline sites in order to interdict the effects of distance and loose chain of command, or casual, seat-of-the pants affairs where a strictly observed salute is about as endearing as a slap.

Ritchie ignores his gesture, fixes him with hard, blue eyes. "You called me a pigfucker, son."

"With all due respect, sir: you were acting like pigfucker." Ray drops his salute. It occurs to him that Lieutenant Kato must be non-Terran, because Colonel Ritchie is most definitely not Scottish.

Still glaring, Ritchie nods at the file he has just discarded. "Says there that you grew up in rural Indiana. What, about twenty miles outside Bloomington?"

"Hoo-ah, sir. Go Hoosiers."

That does it. The Colonel looks away, puts a hand to his mouth to cover his grin. "I guess you never do lose the accent."

"No you don't, but the outworld girls love it."

"They do, don't they?" He points Ray toward one of the chairs opposite his desk and they both sit. "Of course, I came by mine dishonestly. I grew up in Ohio, but did my undergrad and graduate work at Indiana."

"I'm sure the state has been more than happy to adopt you as one of its own."

"It's coming on autumn here, and sometimes I get that feeling still, you know? I can hear the sound of ball on the court, remember the way the cords rip coming off that perfect arch from behind the three point line, getting nothing but net. The echo of an empty gymnasium around you. The odor of floor wax and old sweat." Ritchie shakes his head sadly. "I've got five hundred men under my command here, and not one of them can set a decent pick. And you don't even want to see their jumpshots. Ugly stuff. A travesty. I get depressed just watching them."

Ray lets him go on, this strange, understandable nostalgia. He wonders how long the Colonel has been away, but doesn't ask.

"What is it about Indiana kids, Marlowe?"

"It's just skill. Genetics, maybe."

"Not that. We're everywhere, have you noticed? You can't go anywhere in human space without running into someone from Indiana. Soldiers, tourists, businessmen. You ask anybody at random where they're from, and half the time, they'll be from Indiana. It's like we run away in droves...but when you start talking, the one thing you hear is always that deep, pressing need to go home again. Everybody just waiting for some signal that it's time to get back."

"If we ever did all go back, sir, we'd probably have to annex Illinois and half of Kentucky just to hold us all," Ray says. "Well, maybe not *Kentucky*."

That gets a laugh. Ritchie can't help himself.

Then, "You have an interesting service record for someone your age, Commander Marlowe."

"Yes."

"What branch are you affiliated with currently?"

This means that Ritchie has the official file, not the Jack Holcomb seal-of-approval one. Once upon a time, this would have meant something important to Ray, but he can't muster the energy to care about it. He doesn't feel like playing the game.

"I'm Criminal Investigations."

Ritchie rubs his hand across his mouth, considering. "That clears some things up. You were tracking down possible Lilaiken infiltrations on *Paraclete*."

"That was my assignment. As you can see, I wasn't exactly successful."

"And now?"

Ray shrugs. He has just given Ritchie a perfect opening through which to explore the details of the *Paraclete* disaster without having to get heavy handed later, when he might be prone to suspecting that Ray has chosen to be less than forthcoming with him, but the Colonel has ignored it. "I was given orders to disembark at New Holyoke and pursue another line of inquiry prior to the *Paraclete* disaster."

"The content of those orders being?"

"Classified," Ray says simply.

Ritchie nods, neither sullen nor angry. Not even properly surprised. "I suspected as much. I spoke with a Lieutenant Jack Holcomb a few days ago regarding your imminent arrival. He did not specify that it would involve so much fanfare, but he did stress that your mission was critical. In fact, I was informed in rather terse language that I shouldn't ask what you were up to because it was none of my business. I'm just supposed to offer my assistance to the extent to which I am able. He was a very annoying ether presence."

"I imagine he was, sir." And he also imagines that even a fringe space outpost colonel was not used to being treated as an inferior by a junior officer. "He can be rather abrasive when he wants to be."

"I realize you haven't been on the surface but a couple of days, Commander, so it may be a bit premature, but I'm bound to ask how you're setting up so far given the circumstances."

"I've taken a strategic resources hit, but that's about all. There's no reason I can't proceed from here, assuming I can count on your cooperation on this end."

"A strategic resources hit." Ritchie murmurs. "That's very chilly way of putting it."

"I'm giving you facts and a mission status statement, Colonel. You would probably not want to know my actual psychological status at this point in time."

Ritchie frowns, his tone softens a bit. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm coping, sir. Numb. But I believe I'm processing with sufficient clarity to carry out my assigned instructions."

Now Ray understands why Ritchie skipped the obvious talking point he was offered. He's more interested in Ray's emotional status, cognizant of loss, than in investigation at this moment. There are two possible explanations for this: either the Colonel is a gooey, hands-on, holistic well-being sort of CO, or he has

realized that it's in the best interests of the investigation for him gauge Ray's emotional biases and potential damage before taking what he might say at face value.

It is more than likely the latter.

Ray says, "I was only aboard *Paraclete* for six months, and largely independent during that time." And when he wasn't independent, he was mostly lying to people about his job, identity, and purpose anyway. Not exactly conducive to the formation of long-term friendships. But this isn't the sort of thing he wants to share with Colonel Ritchie. No purpose is served by planting seeds of doubt about his veracity so soon. "I lost more men that I was close to in New Mes, sir, to be completely honest. Most of my current reaction is a response to the blunt force *scale* of this trauma rather than actual emotional involvement."

Ritchie leans back in his chair, steeples his fingers together. "That's a very self-aware deconstruction of your mental state."

"Marines are nothing if not self-aware, Colonel."

Another laugh, this one merely polite. "You've obviously known different Marines than the ones I have." But he doesn't dwell on it. Whatever he's seen or heard from Ray seems to have satisfied him. "I'm as willing as the next rank inflated blow hard to recognize when my operational stake has been trumped by a competing agency. You keep the confidential bits of your mission to yourself if you like. But what happened to *Paraclete* is not a topic that I'm going to allow you to include beneath that umbrella. That happened in my space, on my watch and impacts my reputation. Those are my soldiers scouring the wreckage."

"I understand."

"Then set it up for me, Commander Marlowe. To the best of your knowledge, at least. We'll compare endgame hypotheses later."

Ray takes a moment to phrase his response, to cut it down to debriefing form, meaning just an exhaustive list of the facts rather than his own speculations, a thing he's been doing for years. But it's more complicated this time. He's not just obfuscating the little things, the irrelevant details that can only harm good men who had momentary lapses in judgment or performance. What he has to do here is create an outright fiction, an interpretation of events that bears no practical resemblance to what really occurred.

Because he can't include just the *facts* this time. There are things in his narrative that Ritchie certainly does not know, does not really want to know, and wouldn't want to have heard them even if he comes around to the place where he can believe them. Ray has to tell the story without involving the *shed*. They are a useless complication to a situation that is already out of control, or will be very shortly, when Ray instructs him that a big chunk of his ever evolving primary mission focus on New Holyoke will be the arrest and conviction of Frederick Whiston--and that he fully expects Colonel Ritchie's cooperation in that task.

Ray clears his throat, considers, begins. "I was forwarded to *Paraclete* on Stratiskaya Daransk via the EED tug *Catamaran* in late February (Terran Calendar) with instructions to present myself as a drone network hardware technician. This operation was carried out with the full knowledge and cooperation of Commander Sorensen and Security Chief Becker. They had just completed the Alamai Plantation run and disembarked three-quarters of their passenger complement and were understandably concerned about taking on so many new fares who had only been certified as threat neutral by the Strat outpost rather than EED Terminal Control, with whom they usually work. Commander Sorensen was aware of the ambiguous nature of the recent Goliath disasters and seemed more than happy to have me along."

"Perhaps because he didn't trust a fringe outpost to have the discernment to rule out terrorists," Ritchie

interjects, somewhat bitterly.

"It's my belief that he was more concerned about Strat's access to current and reliable intelligence data."

Ritchie smiles humorlessly. "A very diplomatic escape, Mr. Marlowe. Please continue."

"My mission was to reconfigure the drone network to seek out and obtain positive id matches against the passenger and crew manifests and run those results against the latest crim suspect databases for possible Lilaiken infiltrators. I also provided additional reactor security and emissions analysis based on disaster reconstruction hypotheses from the other disasters. It was a daunting task."

"Apparently more daunting than the resources at your disposal were able to grapple with."

It is not a statement of accusation, but Ray feels the sting of it nonetheless. "Yes, sir. I would tend to agree with that assessment given the circumstances. At the time, it was my belief that I had completed the mission I was assigned and was confident that I had both established id confirmations for everyone aboard as well as cleared them against the standard Lilaiken watch lists. *Paraclete* seemed to have avoided infiltration. Commander Sorensen and Chief Becker were satisfied with my findings. Of course, I was forced to conclude in light of recent events that we were mistaken in our confidence."

"Indeed. But not before you caused the Lilaiken agents on board some distress apparently. Is that how you're reading this situation, Marlowe?"

Ray knows what he means, the dissonance between the previous incidents and *Paraclete*. In each occurrence, the ship had first docked, unloaded essential resources, and been destroyed only upon departure. *Paraclete* was a significant exception.

He chooses his words carefully. "After I had concluded my examination of the passengers, I was requested by Chief Becker to assist in the investigation of a shipboard murder."

"And why would he do that?"

"Because he believed the situation was one that would require some delicacy. He did not want Security involved overtly if it could be avoided, because of possible political ramifications. He felt that my anonymity was a reasonable solution to the unique characteristics presented by this case."

Ritchie arches an eyebrow. "Your anonymity?"

"The victim was one of the children of the Whiston Charitable Trust. A boy named Micah Uytdehaage."

The Colonel leans back in his chair, rolls his tongue around his mouth, but says nothing.

"And the murderer was Frederick Whiston."

Ritchie looks like a man who has just awakened from a nightmare. Then, almost at once, he snaps back, frowns. "You have evidence to document your conclusions, I assume."

Ray imagines the ship's data core floating frozen in space. "Not immediately at hand, no."

"Not--" Ritchie stops, his mouth open, brows pinched. "Ah, the evidence was being held in the ship's encrypted data core."

"Yes."

"And I suppose you want me to do something about this killing?"

"Actually, I want you to charge Frederick Whiston with the mass murder of the crew and passengers of the EED Goliath class starship *Paraclete*."

"Excuse me?" The colonel stiffens, like a man thunderstruck.

"*Paraclete* was sabotaged within a few hours of our determination to detain him for further questioning. It is my conclusion that Frederick Whiston, aware that his arrest was imminent, chose to act at that time, either to carry out his assigned mission prior to arrest or to avoid the legal consequences of his actions. Perhaps both."

"You're telling me you believe that Frederick Whiston was operating as a Lilaiken agent?" Ritchie does not seem to have an expression to attach to this statement. He rifles through a half dozen as he speaks, from surprise to suspicion, dread to imbecility.

And Ray understands perfectly, because he's left out the convincing parts. Without the *shed*, there is no logical significance to the theft of the Solomonic ring from the Iraqi National Museum. Without the knowledge that the Lilaikens had claimed responsibility for that theft and the subsequent admission that they had detonated the hauler *Fortitude* which had transported the ring to New Holyoke, there was no connection between the terrorists and the murder of Micah Uytendehaage. Without the ring, there was no link between the details and ritual of the murder and the conclusion that the will of the Lilaikens was being carried out by a Whiston. Without the *shed*, it was all a house of cards.

"I'm telling you that I was able to establish that Frederick Whiston murdered that child, and that given the manner and timing with which *Paraclete* was destroyed, it is reasonable to assume that he has some attachment to the Lilaiken extremist movement."

Ritchie shakes his head sharply, a twitch like a spasm. "No. That is an unwarranted assumption."

"It is quite the opposite."

"Perhaps to you, but to me, it sounds like a rationalization for your own failures to prevent this tragedy. Frankly, Marlowe, for anyone who has met Frederick Whiston, the argument that he could be trusted as a covert Lilaiken agent is ludicrous. And that is completely beside the fact that you can't even provide evidence that he's guilty of one murder, let alone thousands. What am I supposed to do with that? What could I possibly do that would not jeopardize the credibility of my office and my outpost, for God's sake?"

And he's completely correct in his assessment. In the absence of a compelling argument, a compelling link between Frederick Whiston and the Lilaikens, there is nothing he *should* do. It is up to Ray to give him a connection he can believe. There's no way around it.

He tightens his jaw, grinds his teeth. He hates himself for what he's about to do. What he *has* to do, because he can't endure without the support of Colonel Ritchie and the EED, without their intelligence and communications. Without them, he's lost, impotent, useless. Without them, he has no avenue to justice for all the lives that have been lost.

Ray clears his throat, tasting bile and something bitter, sour, like the flavor of betrayal. He folds himself away, disengages the part of his brain that is human, that can feel the depths of his ugliness and stand back in horror at what he has become.

With a voice full of groaning, he says, "In the process of the murder investigation and my intensive surveillance of Frederick Whiston, I was able to identify certain individuals with whom he had significant contact--individuals sufficiently removed from his regular social circles that they attracted a scrutiny they would not have otherwise warranted. Individuals who could be placed at the crime scene where Frederick Whiston committed the murder of the Trust child. I made the determination that given the uncertainty of their status, they would bear closer watching than my normal surveillance techniques allowed. Because of their proximity to the crime scene, I was able to reasonably recruit them to assist in my investigation, thus deflecting any suspicions they might have that I was aware of them, and at the same time allowing me the latitude to observe them more closely. It became my belief that they could be possible Lilaiken extremists who did not match any of the known identities in our suspect database. Those men were Marine Tactical Sergeant Benjamin Kilgore and Marine Corporal James Rodriguez."

Ritchie inhales sharply, a sound like a gasp, but Ray ignores him. He forces himself to continue, to get all of it out in the open. He is afraid that if he allows himself to pause even for a moment, he'll take everything back, admit to any number of lies rather than let this one stand.

"I believed I had time, given the method the Lilaikens have developed against other EED ships in this sector of frontier space, and I believed also that the human and material resources intended for delivery to New Holyoke would put off any move they might make at least until after docking. So I waited and I built my case, and I hoped for a break that would be something more compelling than circumstances and patterns of behavior.

"It is clear now that I underestimated either how close I was getting, or I overestimated how convincingly I had sold myself to Kilgore and Rodriguez. Despite my best efforts to hide my progress from them, they must have begun to figure things out on their own. I can only conclude that they acted early in order to protect the Lilaiken connection to the Whiston financial empire which would not, I suspect, survive the prosecution of Frederick Whiston on charges of murder."

Colonel Ritchie leans back, uses both hands to rub his forehead. He struggles to maintain his composure, his professional calm, but Ray can see what he's thinking. It's like chewing on razor blades. *Part of the damned crew.*

"Marines," Ritchie says slowly, as though it is beyond belief.

"They were screened as rigorously as the rest of the crew," Ray tells him. "I assume they were turned at some point subsequent to their assignment with *Paraclete*. More than likely, the Lilaikens enlisted them as sleeper agents and held them out for emergency use. That's the only way they could have evaded detection for so long."

"But you were able to find them out."

"I was presented with a unique crisis that brought relationships to light that would have otherwise remained murky. I also had the luxury of time, access to CIU proprietary information not available to most FSA organs and a sample set much smaller than the ones most of our security screeners are subjected to. Those are significant advantages."

"Yet you didn't arrest them, even when you were fairly certain," Ritchie says, and this time there is a rasp of accusation in his tone.

Ray gives him a hard look. "My agency doesn't arrest suspects, Colonel. For that reason, we require a higher standard of proof than a fair certainty."

"Then why didn't you share your findings with Security Chief Becker? He could have acted."

"I convinced Chief Becker to give me more time than was warranted to finalize my case construction."

At the very least, it makes him look stubborn, glorymongering, determined to take unconscionable risks to keep the resolution of the situation within the purview of the CIU. It wouldn't be the first time the agency had fielded such an accusation.

Ritchie takes a deep breath to steady himself. "You couldn't have been any more wrong."

"No, sir."

"And I suppose you have no evidence at hand to support this conclusion, either."

"No."

"I'm just supposed to take your word for it, to believe you in the name of inter-agency cooperation."

"Yes."

"I do not pretend to agree with the way the CIU conducts business, Commander. Your agency has shown an alarming historic tendency to flout both military tradition and Forum law. Your record of sharing critical intelligence data with other FSA departments is less than confidence inspiring, and your preference for relying on single agents augmented by technological superiority rather than full integration with EED field resources has, in my opinion, created more problems than it has solved." Ritchie peers at him for a time, his eyes hard as fletched stone. "I am not a fan of maverick investigations. I am not a fan of field agent independence. Whatever your relationship with the captain of *Paraclete* may have been, and whatever involvement he may have demanded in your operation, it is clear to me that you were provided a perilous and ultimately fatal amount of latitude. If we're going to get along here, the first thing you are required to understand is that I am not Commander Sorensen. I will not blunder around in the dark while you give me vaguely hopeful progress reports. Are we clear?"

"We're clear, Colonel." Ray doesn't experience the urge to even protest anymore. He's heard this speech or variations of it a dozen times. "I understand that this operation places you in a difficult position."

Ritchie waves him off wearily, like he has also heard similar speeches. "It places me, Commander, in an untenable and impossible position. Especially since I have zero confidence in your veracity at this point in time, and I will continue to doubt you until you satisfy me on several additional irregularities.

"For instance, given that this disaster came as a complete surprise to you, to everyone in fact, how is it that you managed to escape, while the saboteurs themselves did not? The Lilaikens have shown themselves to be many strains of zealot, but none of those strains have indicated any symptoms of suicidal ideation."

Ray meets his gaze blandly, eyes and thoughts empty. "Just because I have allowed them through my own failures to accomplish their mission does not mean I'm going to surrender my mission as lost."

"Kilgore and Rodriguez did not escape?"

"No."

Ritchie rubs his chin. "So you discovered that they had managed to critically damage the ship. You hunted them down and you killed them. Then you proceeded to make your escape. Not only yours, I would point out,

but that of the entire Whiston contingent. Given your recounting of the facts, that's an impressive--one might almost say *improbable*--accomplishment."

"I was notified by Security Chief Becker as soon as he became aware that there had been a critical ship's incident. Intercepting Kilgore and Rodriguez was not difficult."

"And while you were off killing the bad guys, what was Becker doing?"

"He was coordinating the efforts to repair the damage to the Van Nuys reactors."

Nodding, Ritchie says, "The containment protocols must have failed catastrophically, and quite suddenly. There were so few survivors. Significantly fewer than a hundred all together. Out of twelve or fourteen thousand, only a handful escaped. An interesting fact, Marlowe, one I've picked up in my interviews with the others--they all report that they were stunned, *stunned*, by the crew's failure to notify the passengers that there was anything amiss until almost the last minute. Without fail, each of my other survivors was, at the time of the announcement, immediately proximate to a pod. Their lives were saved completely by chance."

"Lucky them."

"Lucky them, yes. But you had time to track down your Lilaiken infiltrators, dispatch them, make your way the reactor maintenance level all the way amidships, then against the outer hull to Iota-D, rouse the household and *then* make your escape. You must be very quick."

Ray sees where Ritchie is leading him, and there's no way around it. "Security Chief Becker advised me prior to the general evacuation to get to a podship."

Rich had given his life, sacrificed himself, trying to save *Paraclete*. He deserved so much better than posthumous judgment.

"Did he advise you specifically to seek out the Whiston podship? Or to take the Whistons with you?"

"That was done completely on my own initiative."

The Colonel bores into him with searching eyes, pupils that rattle back and forth like pebbles in a cup. "When he advised you to escape, would you say that Chief Becker gave you the impression that it was already too late to save the ship?"

"My understanding was that the situation was critical, and that this advance warning constituted a professional courtesy between agencies. He also knew that I was the only person beside himself who had direct knowledge of Frederick Whiston's culpability."

Ritchie growls. "But he warned you before alerting the passengers. How long before?"

"He was preparing to activate the shipwide disaster warnings. Maybe five minutes."

Ray could read Ritchie's mind at this moment if he wanted to. He could sense the EED officer counting, adding, multiplying. How many lives could have been saved with five additional minutes of notice?

"There was no evacuation notice," Ritchie says after a time.

"It malfunctioned. Rich couldn't have predicted that. He did the best he could given a situation that was spiraling beyond his control."

"You, of course, assume it was sabotaged."

"Kilgore and Rodriguez would have had the expertise between them to do it. If you can learn how to fatally crack a Van Nuys reactor, dismantling an automated warning system is not such a giant leap of cognition."

"Your duty should have been to stay with the ship and assist in the alert and evacuation of the passengers."

"No, sir. My duty was to identify and neutralize Lilaiken agents. I failed, and then I rectified that situation to the best of my ability. After that, my duty was to recognize that I was still a CIU asset with a mission to complete on New Holyoke, and that part of my evolving mission parameters had just become the detainment and prosecution of Frederick Whiston and the identification of Frederick Whiston's possible Lilaiken allies in this attack. Which is why I agreed to answer your most cordial invitation to attend today. I thought you would be able to help me."

That elicits a deep frown from Colonel Ritchie. "I still can't say I like the way CIU prioritizes. But I also can't argue with your decision to rescue the Whistons, regardless of what motivations you might have had. You certainly won't hear the colony complaining."

Ritchie's relenting is like a boulder rolling off Ray's chest. He takes a deep breath. "Their gratitude will only last until I have him arrested and convicted--and preferably executed."

"It's not going to be as simple as that."

Ray shrugs. "I'll get the evidence that's required. I gathered it once; I can find it again."

"I don't think you do understand, Marlowe. You *can't* understand until you've been here for a few months, maybe even a few years. If you choose to pursue this course, you are completely on your own. No one on this planet is going to help you destroy Frederick Whiston."

"Even if he's guilty?"

"What do they care? The settlers, the habs, the miners, they didn't know this kid. What they do know is the price of ore, the cost of aluminum shipped from Terra, the need for engineers and geologists and well-paid, well-educated professionals who can find the next vein, the next lode that will keep Whelemat afloat. Those things are jobs, quality of life, basic human stuff. Those things are all provided by Whiston funds, subsidies or recruitment. Even as reclusive as the family has become in recent years, they are essential to the success of New Holyoke as a viable colony. They're the founding fathers, the heart, the guiding vision. Certainly, the colony has its own government structure, and the Whistons have wisely distanced themselves from the political side of things, but the folks supposedly in charge would be stupid to do anything contrary to the Whiston will. Because the fact is, if the Whistons ever lose interest in the colony, if they ever decide to withdraw from the exile they've forced upon themselves, the colony dies. Everyone knows it."

"Which is to say that you're not going to do a freaking thing about what I've told you."

"Not until you can prove it, no."

For several moments, they sit in silence, Commander and Colonel, EED and CIU. Finally, Ritchie slumps in his chair, releases his tension with a heavy sigh that seems to deflate him into a smaller version of himself.

"Look, Marlowe, I understand that this is frustrating for you. I understand that you've just come through a terrible and tragic experience. But you're not offering me anything that I can legally act upon. Your testimony carries no weight without documentation to back up your hypothesis. I want to believe you. I really do, but the

reality you describe, the assumptions you've made--especially those regarding the Whiston family--do not conform to the experience of anyone who knows New Holyoke. I'm sorry."

"They don't conform how?"

"To make your charges stick in any way that's going to bring justice to Frederick Whiston, you've got to be able to show that he didn't just kill some kid, but that he killed *Paraclete*. I don't mean the ship itself, but the ship as resource, as entertainment, as new settlers. You've got to prove that Frederick Whiston colluded with Lilaikens to conspire against the very lifeblood of this colony in such a way that the harm he intended outweighs the good his family has done. Your thesis all hangs on the assumption that he is bound up with the Lilaikens, and that their pattern of violence is detrimental to colony life. The problem you've got is that you have to establish that Frederick Whiston would have sufficient contact with the radical movement that he would be willing to do something as extreme as destroying a starship. And that would be hard, since there *is* no Lilaiken presence on New Holyoke. None that we've been able to verify, at least. Certainly, there are those who are sympathetic to the Lilaiken rhetoric, but even that lukewarm support has chilled in recent months with the escalating violence. The scenario you describe makes no sense, even if it did not involve Frederick Whiston. He may very well have murdered that boy as you claim, but the lines between the murder and the destruction of *Paraclete* appear nothing more than coincidental."

In other words, there's nothing EED is willing to do for him until he's already proven that Freddy is guilty beyond doubt. All that he has accomplished is to have spared Frederick Whiston and destroyed Kilgore and Rodriguez. Again.

"You're advising me to just drop that avenue of investigation," Ray answers.

Ritchie gives him a pained look. "I'm perfectly content to accept your explanation as to the chain of events on *Paraclete* and the involvement of these Marines with stipulations for now, pending recovery of the ship's data core or other evidence to the contrary. We'll do what we can to assist you in firming up the evidence so that a formal report can be filed."

"And the murder of the Trust kid, of Micah Uytdehaage." Ray wonders bleakly if the outcome would have been any different if he would have told Ritchie the truth about the *shed*.

"We're also more than willing to provide any logistical support you might need in pursuing this murder investigation, though that's essentially the extent of the help I can offer in that regard. It is technically outside our jurisdiction, though I can put you in touch with my counterpart in Grange Security if you'd like."

We're more than willing to wash our hands of this whole mess.

Ray doesn't even wave him off, just scowls. "Thanks, no. I'll handle it on my own."

"With proper and appropriate respect for legal convention, I assume?" Ritchie asks with a touch of humor that is so dry, it might not be humor at all. "I'll remind you that while the prosecution of civilian crimes does not fall under my purview, the murder of a civilian by an FSA officer does, regardless of what agency he might happen to be affiliated with."

Ritchie smiles at him, sly and menacing. "And in the meantime, what else can we do to extend the hand of hospitality to a visiting colleague?"

So he leaves it there, unresolved, content to wait for now. It isn't like Frederick can go anywhere, like he can escape beyond Ray's reach.

He says, "I'd like a status report on the rescue operation."

"Slow. In case you hadn't noticed, we're a frontier outpost here. As I told you, I've got five hundred men under my command. Most of those rotate duty shifts between the Port Authority station and the rescue and interdiction vessels we've been assigned. Our 'fleet' is three docking tugs, two Corsair class destroyers, a handful of short-range fighter craft and a dozen shuttles and other assorted small freight vehicles. A ship the size of *Paraclete* is a staggering drain on our functional capacity, and we've been at it for almost three days now. My crews are exhausted, my hardware is insufficient for anything but the slowest scans. Add to that the fact that they haven't found any survivors yet to maintain their adrenaline edge and...well, it's fair to say that the operation is more accurately described as salvage rather than rescue."

That's disappointing, but not unexpected. Ritchie still seems to feel the need to apologize. "I wish I could offer you more, but we simply don't have the resources out here to provide much hope. I had to beg the city for the facilities on the ground that we do have. We don't even have housing. When my guys rotate down from the station, they've got to find their own lodgings among the general pop."

"My contingent is shuttle pilots, comm liaisons for EED freighters, general techs and sailors. We don't have much currency with local government beyond providing a few security advisors. Unlike the department's role on many fledgling colonies, we're strictly independent support. New Holyoke provides its own Port Authority staffing, its own policing force. If they had their way, they'd probably provide their own high-orbital security. With the general planet pop leaning toward a million individuals at the latest count, and half of them here in Blackheath Grange alone, we're stretched thin. We are, in fact, a non-presence beyond twenty kilometers of the city."

"Yet you're certain that the colonists aren't sympathetic the Lilaiken rhetoric."

Ritchie shrugs off the point as though it is irrelevant. "New Holyoke has nothing to gain from independence. The economy is too small to generate a significant impact on goods exchange, which means that they'd have a tough time attracting reasonable trade. Shipping is expensive, and would prohibitively so if not for the Whiston hauling subsidies. And I'd like to think that we've been careful to avoid developing an antagonistic relationship with the colony the way you've seen in places like Olduvai and Alamai Plantation. We've tried to become an organic member of this community."

"Which diminishes your authority as an apparatus of the FSA and the Forum," Ray points out. "You open yourself up to undue influence and unnecessary compromises with local political factions."

"Do you have any idea how far we are from Terran space? Sometimes you have to compromise just to survive. You have to make allowances for local customs, regional flavor. Marlowe, this isn't Earth. These people are not Earthlings. Not anymore."

"The same thing could be said about your relationship with EED."

Ray expects Ritchie to bristle, but instead he laughs. "All that can legitimately be said about my interpretation of the EED's role on New Holyoke is that we're invisible much of the time. We provide essential services and support Forum rule of law in a non-aggressive, non-totalitarian fashion. New Holyoke is a different world than any we have ever experienced. It has its own ways, its own traditions, its own rhythm. Anything beyond invisibility is antagonistic to our mission statement because it alienates us from the population at large. A population, I might add, drawn from a small, increasingly homogeneous population pool, with similar modes of employment, similar domestic experiences, and all of them heavily invested in frontier fringe philosophies that seem alien to us. Which they should, by the way, because they are alien. Or perhaps I should say that we are the aliens observing what is distinctly and organically Holyokan. From that perspective, it only makes sense that the average folks are not very interested in passing secrets about their neighbors on to suspiciously

military looking, suspiciously alien strangers. You want definitive proof that there are no Lilaiken extremists on New Holyoke? I don't have it and I can't get it for you. We can't extract the types of secrets we'd be most interested in without being perceived as Terran imperialistic thugs--which would be exactly what the Lilaikens want us to do."

Ritchie shrugs casually, as though further explanation is redundant. "You've definitely got your work cut out for you. There are no active cells, but everyone here is a potential Lilaiken sympathizer. They're just waiting for the inevitable population explosion to give them economic clout."

Ray wrinkles his brow thoughtfully. The problem with new starfields, giggly new colonies and strange or distant lands was that they always turned out to be so terribly complicated. "You don't sound very concerned about it."

"I don't see any way to change it, not without EED radically enlarging its presence here and tightening political controls, which both EED and the FSA at large have been hesitant to do at this point, present tragedies notwithstanding. Why? Because to do that, we need a Forum mandate. To get a Forum mandate, we need to be able to combat the Whiston lobby, which is no small presence. Half of the Forum delegates are financed by the Whiston Corp, and just because the family root has been exiled to deep space does not mean that their allies don't wield any power back home. Now, that's not to say that the Holyokan Whistons have anything to do with the Terran branch, only that the Terrans are politically savvy enough to recognize that it's in their best interest to protect the agreements the Forum has made with them or their affiliates in the past. The Terran branch would view any action against the New Holyokan mandate as a slippery slope. The Forum can't go back on the agreements they've made with the Whistons in the form of Whelemat and proprietary interest without embarrassing themselves number one, and number two, looking like they're taking aim at the Whiston Corp power base."

Which means ultimately that Colonel Ritchie and the EED are more concerned about appeasing the Whistons than about rooting out the Lilaiken presence. They've scratched the surface, and having found no mineable ore, have given up the planet as unprofitable.

It also means once again that despite Ritchie's offers of assistance, Ray is essentially alone here. It wouldn't be the first time. And when alone, the first impulse is always to reach out, orient yourself, gather data.

"What's your comm situation?" he asks.

"Standard hyper-accelerated wave relay to the satellite net, then beacon jumpers along the shipping lanes and assorted booster stations. I can supply ten-twenty-eight key encryption on synchronized, flux bands."

"Are you network enabled with the Port Authority station?"

"And with general EED data trans stations. We get remote file refresh data chunks nightly."

Ray nods. It's a creaky system, prone to error and corrupted bitstreams, but it's probably the best they can manage. It will have to do. "I'm not going to be able to make regular trips out here to access your data hub, Colonel. I need you to provide me with a as robust a terminal as you can spare, network authorization and a comm-sat receiver remote patch array." He thinks, thinks. Nomar. "And I need a blank diagnostic hardware box with petaflop crystal storage blocks, interchangeable data grids, SNE input/output port enabling..."

Ritchie holds up his hand to stop him, looking aghast. "The equipment I can manage, though it will eat into our backups. And when I say backups, I mean one. One backup. If I give you that one and a critical system goes down, I'm screwed. But the comm-sat remote array is impossible."

"Nothing is impossible."

"What part of *under-resourced* don't you understand?" Ritchie flushes, clearly frustrated. "If I plug another remote hub into our system, it's going to degrade data transmission capabilities to intolerable levels."

"Bullshit."

"Did you bring signal boost relays with you in your luggage, Mr. Marlowe? Because I haven't got any more. I'm pushing my streams to the limit as it is without purchasing additional bitstreams from local interests."

"I'm not asking you to give me all your bandwidth, Colonel. Just let me borrow it for a few days."

"A few days." Ritchie doesn't sound convinced.

"Maybe weeks. Who knows?"

Firm shake of the head. "Can't do it."

"Let me put it this way, then. If you don't give it to me, I'll be forced to manufacture my own hardware--which I'm more than capable of doing--and from there I will hack your digital network with a parasite data pipe and take the data I need anyway. The problem with a parasite pipe, of course, is that it bleeds signal over distance, which means it sucks much more bandwidth than is strictly necessary to compensate. That would be slow, arduous and annoying for both of us, but I would most certainly do it, and I would give your data integrity techs fits in the process."

Ritchie scrubs fiercely at his face, then looks up. "You would, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Could you at least promise me that you'll try to limit your remote access to overnight hours?"

"I can do that." Mostly, anyway. Ray grins at him.

Ritchie looks away. "You must have been one hell of a soldier to have gotten this far up the ranks, Marlowe, because I've got to tell you, as an officer attempting to follow protocol, you suck. You're almost as bad as Jack Holcomb."

"Thank you, Colonel," Ray responds with a wink. "You give new depth of meaning to the concept of inter-agency cooperation."

Ritchie just scowls. "I'll have one of my comm techs assemble the items you've requested if you leave a list at the front desk. But you're going to come pick it up, by God. I'll be damned if I make any of my guys ferry it out to you just to make your life easier."

Muttered, almost inaudible. "Inter-agency cooperation, my ass."

Chapter Four

Less than two days removed from watching friends and colleagues purged into vacuum by the destruction of *Paraclete*, and only scant hours from the betrayal of the memories of Kilgore and Rodriguez so he could purchase the cooperation of EED with plausibility, Ray crunches up the white pebble path from guest cottage to manor house feeling like a combination between some old-time effete British poof and an organ grinder's monkey in gilded jacket and crimson fez. Except for the bit about the fez, of course. No one wears a fez anymore.

Instead, he's wrapped in this preposterous evening suit, sleek and black and faintly shimmering as though the matte fabric has been interwoven with strands of blue silk. It pinches his wrists and ankles, clings to his legs, has an annoying tendency to ride up the crack of his ass. In the mirror, it looked to him like a slightly less ostentatious version of a matador's ceremonial garb, again minus the hat, and with the minor concession that the pantlegs went all the way down to his ankles, thus sparing him the ultimate embarrassment of wearing knickers in public.

Jagiri, striding alongside him, has assured him numerous times that this passes for high fashion in the rarified air of New Holyoke's highest social circles. He could, he has been told, be a clothing model, he looks so fine. In turn, Ray has informed Jagiri that if he forgets himself and makes such a comment in front of other actual people, Ray will break most of the bones in his fragile little body, one at a time.

All he wants is a comfortable pair of khaki pants with plenty of extra pockets for things like chipboards and loose circuits, maybe some spare rounds of ammunition and a bar of symtec gel explosives. Then a cool cotton t-shirt, yes. And heavy shit-kicker jump boots. That's what he would *like*.

He'd kill for the boots, if nothing else.

These things he's wearing on his feet--nondescript quasi-leather sleeves with hard, flat soles and a polish so vigorous they reflect light in the entire visible spectrum and a dozen other wavelengths science has yet to discover--well, they're an insult to the entire concept and implied purpose of footwear technology. They give his feet the constant impression that he's walking on a fine sheet of glass. Glass coated in mineral oil, no less, so that each step is an adventure, an invitation to a pratfall. He doesn't so much walk toward the manor house as he skates up the rise, glides like a frenetic fog, slips and stumbles as though the terrain is a vast conspiracy of banana peels.

That's what it feels like, anyway.

He's glad it's dark, that the cones of light strung out along the path are dim, so only the vault of stars and his quietly grinning companion can see him flailing.

He suspects this is some sort of subliminal cue that Jagiri alone or Jagiri with Emma colluding has foisted upon him. To wit, in reference to his restricted range of motion and lack of propulsion-enabling traction: gentlemen of the higher social set do not sit around at exclusive dinner parties plotting the best way to take things outside where they will drunkenly kick one another's asses over implied insults. The clothing prohibits even the contemplation of ass-thumping. It just isn't going to happen.

It makes him feel all fuzzy inside to think that Emma is looking out for him in this way.

They enter the house from the back, through a pair of ornamentally encrusted wooden doors that are heavy enough to impress Samson. Beyond is a narrow foyer, which Ray's mother would have called a mud room--except that transplanted back to the Indiana homestead, she would have called it no such thing (except maybe a *parlor*) and instantly converted it into a fabulously utilitarian sitting room complete with parlor with

a grand piano and vases of plastic flowers and comfortable chairs. It's all dark, intricately carved panels with teardrop chandeliers hanging from the ceiling and brass fittings for the row of coat closets, wall-affixed lamps and lightswitch touchplates. Of course, in Ray's estimation, this also makes it shamefully ostentatious for a room in which you're supposed to rub your feet on the mats so you don't track dirt in onto the carpets.

And this is the rear entrance. He imagines by extension that the front foyer must be studded with gemstones and attended by elegant, half-nude nymphets bearing bowls of rose-petaled water in which guests were invited to dip their snobby little fingers.

With Jagiri to guide him, they slip into a dimly lit corridor banked against the back wall with towering windows that look out over the lazy decline of the back acreage. Along the other wall, spaced at regular intervals, are paintings, sculptures wedged in alcoves and illuminated by subdued spotlights, more than one creaking suit of armor. This makes a bizarre sort of sense. Can't build yourself an English Farmstead Revival pseudo-castle without the obligatory suits of armor stacked about across the furlongs of marble floors. Their exact placement is probably specified on the blueprints. It's part of the feng shui.

"It feels like we've snuck into a museum after hours," Ray whispers to Jagiri, and wonders immediately why he's whispering.

The young man nods. "Not an inappropriate impression. The Whiston family brought many Terran treasures into exile. Much of this portion of the house is unused these days. These galleries are opened to the public a few days a year, much like a museum. And I've conducted more than one tour for some of the local children, as part of their studies." They take a series of series of switchback turns into smaller halls, thumping up and down truncated staircases, past doorways that open into snug, pointless rooms and even more closed doors that hide other rooms Ray can only assume are just as snug and pointless. "The family largely lives upstairs. Staff on the second floor. Frederick and his mother on the third."

"And Emma in the tower," Ray adds. "Is that Freudian?"

"Moreso if it were Frederick, I think," Jagiri answers, winking.

Ray does not allow himself to grin as widely as the jab deserves. "This house has way too many empty rooms."

"Yes."

"Why build a house this big, do you think?"

"It was the seat of government early in the colony's history. I understand that most of the rooms on this level were used as offices by assorted officials."

"But surely the family, and Fram in particular, didn't expect it to stay that way? I tell you, this is a *big* house. This is the type of house a man builds when he plans on having scads and scads of children, and them having scads more, and so on. I guess Fram's ambitions were directed elsewhere, eh?"

Jagiri looks away.

Ray goes on, "So here's a curious question, right? Why add the two wings for the Trust when you've got all these other empty rooms where you could stack the kids and the offices and the classrooms and whatever else you need to run an orphanage?"

"I could not say, Mr. Marlowe."

"How many kids did Fram have?"

"There were two. Charles, the father of Emma and Frederick, and Anna, who died very young."

Ray arches an eyebrow. "Just two? All this space for two kids, the wife and Fram?"

Jagiri stops suddenly in the middle of the hall. He grips Ray's elbow and stares at him, disturbed, conflicted, the muscles of his jaw bunching and releasing. Finally, he says in a low voice, "Mr. Marlowe, I ask you not to discuss these things in the manor house where they might be overheard, please. You are an intelligent man, yes? A man who has seen much of the galaxy, a man with some sophistication. Hear me when I say to you that such light comments about the family here on New Holyoke are not welcome, especially now with Dame Whiston in such obvious decline."

Jagiri releases Ray's arm and drops his eyes, as though he's afraid he might have offended by speaking so bluntly. "Fram Whiston, you must have heard, was a man with grand visions for what this colony would become. For what his *family* would become. But it was obvious even in his day, I think, that the Whiston family has begun to decline. These are issues among elite families throughout human history, you understand? The social circle is small, the bloodlines interwoven. Strength breeds weakness after so many generations. It is without intending any disrespect to them that I say they are not who they once were. They are physically fragile, prone to illness of body and mind, wasting away.

"Please, this is why the Whistons need New Holyoke. This generation, Emma and Frederick, could feasibly be the last of the true Whiston root. The Terran branches are poseurs, add-me-ins, foreign stock whose bloodlines have not been so strictly observed. Emma and Frederick cannot go back to that social milieu and follow the path of the rest of the family. It would not be allowed. Their mates would be selected based on pedigree and status, and would represent a genetic flaw that would ultimately be destructive. They would generate weak children.

"On New Holyoke, they might find better genetic diversity. Not the same status, of course, perhaps not individuals of their proper social caste, but people who will be better for the family in general, who will reverse this degeneration.

"I have long thought that Fram perceived this trend; that though he was not capable of reversing it himself without making what would constitute questionable moral decisions, the genetic diversity promised by a colonial endeavor augmented by unpredictable migration patterns was of paramount importance. More than the mining, more than the possibility of increasing the family wealth, Fram wanted to save the Whiston family in a way that it was impossible to save it on Terra because social convention wouldn't allow it. This house is, I think, a reflection of Fram's purpose. A promise to himself and his children, you see, to return the family's glory. Do you understand?"

Ray shakes his head. "I understand it's like some screwed up eugenic experiment."

"No, not eugenic. Biodiversity, Mr. Marlowe."

"Old, dead Fram must have been one seriously annoying bastard. I'll tell you that."

"I'm almost certain he was. Great men tend to be annoying bastards."

Ray flaps his hands at Jagiri, to shut him up. "All right. I understand what you're saying. I promise not to ask insensitive questions about the fall of the house of Whiston. Let's get moving again, please, before we're late and make a scene."

But there is no "we" in the scene making. Jagiri leads him down a final corridor lined with a plush crimson runner over shimmering dark marble to a pair of ponderously tall and ornate doors braced with golden knobs, lavishly carved panels and polished to a sheen so fine, Ray can see his reflection in the aged wood. Jagiri turns the knob enough for it to unlatch, then offers Ray a curiously formal bow, face averted, hands pressed together and backs away.

Ray watches him depart toward a cleverly obscured side passage, horrified. "You're abandoning me?"

"Such is the price of celebrity, Mr. Marlowe." Grinning, winking, enjoying the torment.

"Chicken."

"As you say." More grinning, so wide his head is about to split in half, flop open like a jewelry box. "Your devoted fans await."

Ray bares his teeth, growls, but proceeds. There's no legitimate reason to hold back. He's been through worse, taken nastier, more fortified, more dread-inspiring positions while dodging a skitter and flash of Russoturk weapons' fire. Hasn't he?

Cursing quietly, trying to keep his shoes under his feet and his feet beneath his center of gravity, he plunges in, mentally prepared for the obligatory hail of gunfire, a cannonade of rocket-propelled grenades, or at the very least a clamor of unwanted attention and curious stares.

He's thinking: *Objective: single agent covert insertion into hostile or occupied territory.*

Standard Protocol Step #1: Obtain latest ground situation intelligence. Debriefing via Jagiri, Check.

SPS #2: Have local contact, sympathetic to your objectives, to provide intel on rapidly changing social and political conditions. Theoretically, support from Emma, Check.

SPS #3: If possible, arrive under cover of darkness via untraceable transport mechanism. Everyone knows he's staying in the guest cottage, but it is dark, Sort-of Check.

SPS #4: Neutralize any and all target obstacles, individuals or agents which cannot be evaded. Um. Protocol taken under advisement; Possible future action required.

SPS #5: Blend. Blend. Blend.

The door closes behind him, actually slams beneath its thunderous weight. Ray jumps at the sound, grimacing, instantly nailed to the floor by a dozen pairs of eyes, a dozen curious or outraged glances. He smiles an apology, sheepish. Waves to his fans.

Definitely not-Check. Critical mission failure.

Dear John and Bethany Marlowe,

We regret to inform you that your youngest son, pretend-Commander, Gunny Sergeant Ray D. Marlowe, agent of the Federal Space Administration, formerly Allied Forces Marine, was lost in attempting to complete an assigned mission of the utmost importance to the war effort. We wish to extend our deepest condolences and sympathy, but the truth is that he was a dumbass and a certified assclown who could not have carried out

his final mission with a more idiotic display of ineptitude if we'd given him a manual.

The dining room is long, seems impossibly so, the size of a Marine barracks. Double bunked, he could stack an entire company in here. Serving tables line the walls, stacked with covered silver platters. More permanent tables are weary with flowers, blossoms of lavender and rose-petaled waterfalls that might be orchids or something more exotic, or even native flora, none of which Ray can attest to because he failed the Natural and Xenonative Botany Instruction module during Basic Training. If it's not a dandelion, a daffodil or a black-eyed susan, it's just a *wildflower* of anonymous sort waiting for some enterprising lad to come along with a lawnmower. More artwork here, wherever it can be crammed, this of the modern variety, meaning that it looks like stuff assembled from clay and Popsicle sticks by third-graders, carried home in crowded backpacks to the delight of mom, ravaged by pre-kindergarten siblings and subsequently glued back together into some vague semblance of its original unrecognizable form and slapped onto the bookshelf above the reach of grubby little hands.

Then there are portraits, perhaps a dozen, of bearded men with piercing blue eyes, swathed in dour suits long out of fashion, pale ladies in shimmering dresses, looking winsome and uncertain. All of them distinctly Whiston, refined, serious, unsmiling. More chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, giving the room a soft-lens glow and gathered shadow uncertainty. The crackle of an autumn fire in a massive hearth against the far wall. In the center of the room, a table long and thin burdened by more floral displays, which Ray studies with some detail because these centerpieces tall and dense, and if he sits *there* or *there*, or even *right there* he might successfully manage to obscure himself from most of the gathered guests.

Shortly, Emma disengages herself from a cluster of elder gentlemen and wanders over to Ray's side, giving him an excuse to stop gawking and shuffling his feet. She takes his arm just above the elbow.

She's in blue satin, which complements her eyes. Her hair is pulled up off her shoulders into some contortionists dream of folds and waves, invisible pins and long, protruding spikes like knitting needles poked into the back at provocative angles.

"You look dashing, Commander," she whispers.

"I feel like a baboon." He responds stiffly, standing with his shoulders back, almost in a parade-rest pose so he bears as little resemblance to anything simian as possible. "I won't tell you how you look because the only vocabulary I have for it is not the type that you break out in front of a lady."

"Tonight, I am most certainly a lady."

"I'm probably going to embarrass you, then."

She almost shatters her illusion of sophistication with giggles, but manages to cover her mouth with her hand. "Just promise me that you'll refrain from dragging any of the other guests outside and kicking their asses if they offend you."

He nods his agreement, oddly comforted that at least his suspicions with regards to the movement-restrictive clothing were correct.

She continues, "These are mostly gentlemen from the press, and they'd make grand news of it. But they're generally harmless, this group at least. In return for a history of civility, we like to give them the juicy news bits first. They're very anxious to meet you and hear the stirring and harrowing tale of our escape."

"I'm afraid that's classified information."

She gives him a small pout. "They're going to be terribly disappointed if you don't tell them something exciting. But only exciting, please. Nothing scandalous."

"What counts as scandalous?"

"Anything that involves punching Frederick or attempting to seduce me."

He lifts an eyebrow. "I haven't attempted to seduce you yet. I've been a model of restraint."

"But I've been practicing my protestations of maidenly virtue with the understanding that you will eventually. Sooner rather than later, I hope. I've practically exhausted my reserves of resistance just practicing."

"Are you coming on to me?" he asks. "Please be coming on to me."

"Of course not. We're in the middle of a dinner party, and I haven't even made the proper introductions yet." Reflection, or dramatic pause to be certain she has his attention, then in a small voice, "But ask me again later."

God, she is driving him crazy.

The proper introductions involve strenuous handshakes with a few burly gentlemen in expensive suits and their equally burly wives--newspaper men, he is told up front by Emma, for which she is awarded a set of playful snarls, as though this was not information they would have had Ray know until it was too late. Even so, he can almost see them taking mental notes on him, studying his movements, his diction, his level of evasiveness, all the time composing snappy prose and block letter headlines. Their wives are fluttery moths who touch his elbows and speak dramatically about the *tragedy* and the *horror* and the fact that EED wouldn't have such a nasty reputation on New Holyoke if there were more men like him to bear the banner of decency. They obviously have no idea what they're talking about, which is fine with Ray, because it makes it much easier for him to confront their questions with a clumsy yet firm quasi-official statement that any comments he might have on the *Paraclete* incident were still considered classified information by the military apparatus, at least until the conclusion of the official investigation.

With Emma on his arm, he is able to be charming and polite, but mostly they make it easy on him. They are certainly newspaper men, just as Emma said, but not newsmen. Publishers, executives, plutocrats who enjoyed socializing in the Whiston circle more than breaking any kind of story. Their eyes said they were much more interested in the way Emma clung to him than what he had to say.

After half an hour of wandering from chattering gaggle to limp-wristed clutch to falsely grinning herd, Emma says, "I have to leave you for a few minutes. Can you keep yourself out of trouble?"

Ray glances around, sites the wet bar off to his left. "This isn't exactly my type of party. But I can manage."

"I'm preparing a surprise that I hope will maybe make it your type of party."

He doesn't know what she means, but to his way of thinking, this should involve a large cake, a great deal of alcohol and Emma in various provocative stages of undress springing out of the aforementioned pastry and onto his lap. This is probably not what she has in mind, so he says, "I think I can handle the intrepid New Holyoke media contingent until you get back."

"You expected more of a challenge."

"Honestly, yes."

Emma presses her shoulder against him. "Just remember they're still sizing you up. They're trying to determine what to make of you and how you fit into the Whiston puzzle. That, and there's no blood in the water yet. If you start to bleed, then the sharks will come."

"These guys strike me more like whales than sharks."

"Don't underestimate them." She's serious, looking up at him with wide, warning eyes. "They can do a great deal of harm to my family and the colony if they take a mind to do so. And they wouldn't hesitate to destroy you if it amused them, or if you gave them sufficient reason."

Ray touches her cheek with the back of his hand. "You're so cute when you worry about me."

"I'm serious."

"I believe you. And to prove it, regarding this theme of my personal destructions: What have you told them so far? About our escape, I mean."

"Nothing."

Ray is thinking about the story he crafted for Colonel Ritchie this afternoon. "It might be best if you kept it that way, at least for now. I can explain later, but let's just say that you could get me in some pretty significant trouble if the story you told diverged too radically from the one I told EED today."

"Ooh, blackmail potential." She treats him to a long, lascivious, studious gaze. "I believe that means I have you completely in my power now."

So she leaves him, laughing wickedly, skirts the long table and disappears from the room.

Alone, Ray drifts over to the bar, selects a tumbler, ice, starts sorting through the assorted decanters and carafes for scotch. After sniffing at three or four containers, he finds it.

"You should try the whiskey. The scotch tastes like piss."

Ray tops off his glass and turns around. The man standing beside him is tall, sandy-haired, inexpertly shaven. He's wearing a soft tweed jacket over slacks, a white shirt, brown loafers. Looks very comfortable for a party which is not the tweed and loafers variety. Or if it was, Ray owes Jagiri a punch in the stomach.

"Believe me, I know," the man continues amiably. "One of the perks of my profession, you might say. Detailed knowledge of the best complimentary bars and buffets on New Holyoke. This is one of the best, don't get me wrong, but no one in the house drinks scotch. They stock it just for the guests, for the reporters mostly, who are fools for scotch as a rule. I can never tell if they keep putting out the piss because they don't know any better or because they know it's what we prefer."

He extends a hand. "Thomas Malcolm, *Grange Guardian*. I missed the introductions, I'm afraid, so I thought I should make them myself before I appeared rude."

Ray returns the handshake. "Ray Marlowe."

"Oh, I know who you are."

He doesn't imagine for a moment that Thomas Malcolm missed him. More likely, Ray has been buttonholed by some obnoxious hack who didn't want to share quotes. "You're a reporter?"

"Reporter, editor, publisher. Smallest daily on New Holyoke. The big time players don't like to *klatch* with the newcomers, especially not those of us who have to actually get our hands grubby with the newsgathering. Thought I'd have more luck one on one, man to man, so to speak."

Uh-huh.

"You're just some working stiff, right?"

Malcolm tilts his head vaguely, indicating the opposite side of the room. "Damn right, in fact. They're socializing; I'm working. Been over there talking to Frederick Whiston and some of his devotees since you came in. Trying to get the good stuff before the jackals pick it over."

Ray follows the roll of his eyes, though it isn't strictly necessary. He's been aware of Frederick's presence all along, just as he was equally conscious of Emma's deft navigational ability in keeping them constantly apart, preferably with the table between them. Freddy has stationed himself beneath the portrait of one of his ancestors. Same dark eyes, prominent cheek bones, snarling features, but he suffers by such immediate comparisons. Freddy appears wan and insubstantial, underfed, beneath their stern, technicolor images. He's deeply involved in relating some story that involves a pallid shift of expressions, ranging from snobbish offense to lidded-eye dismissal, punctuated by limp flicks of his wrists.

"I wasn't aware he'd been released from the hospital," Ray muses, trying to sound thoughtful. See? No trouble here. Move along.

"Been out since this morning, actually. Rodney Beck, the family physician, pulled him into private care as soon as he could push the paperwork through. He's trying to cover, naturally. Family's best interest, of course. Hiding the fact that the young scion is a simpering drunk."

Ray stiffens. "I wouldn't know anything about that."

Malcolm nods, grinning. "Sure. Of course not."

"So long as we're clear on that," Ray responds as distinctly and noncommittally as possible. "I'm really not the kind of guy you want to ask about Whiston family business."

"See, now I like that. You're a straight up military kind of guy. Give respect where it's due, always publicly polite. It's a shame, really. Frederick could learn a lesson or two from you. He's making it more than plain that *he* doesn't like you very much, though he's not at all interested in telling us why." Malcolm rubs his fingers along the side of his face. "Though that's a nice bruise he's got along chin, I notice. Injuries sustained during the escape, I'm certain, but I'd be a terrible shame to my profession if I neglected to mention that it looks like somebody cleaned his clock for him. A man who wasn't careful with his facts could make some unwarranted assumptions about a thing like that, characterize a whole relationship in an unpleasant light."

Ray's grip on his tumbler whitens his knuckles until they pop like the crackle of gunfire. He makes himself relax before he does something embarrassing like shatter the glass.

"You really don't want to talk to me about this."

"Sure I do. You're big news, Commander Marlowe. A new and mercurial celebrity in the New Holyoke constellation of stars. It's been my experience that young studs elevated to such heights desperately want to know what sorts of things others are saying about them, especially those folks who are in a position to cause problems for them."

"I'm not much of a jealous celebrity type." Ray forces himself into a convivial expression, all humor and big, smiling teeth. "You on the other hand, Mr. Malcolm, must be very successful, or at least that's what I gathered from all the impolite things the gentlemen from the other news outlets were saying about you."

Malcolm blinks at him for a moment, confused or stunned, then smiles widely. "You've played this game before."

Ray merely shrugs.

"That was nicely done, though not very fair. I was expecting some big, dumb EED grunt who would be falling over his own feet to whore himself out to the media."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you."

"No, you're not."

"True." Ray jerks his thumb at the bar. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Sure, whiskey. Straight." An exchange of glances and Malcolm purses his lips apologetically. "I never touch the scotch. Learned my lesson a long time ago."

They stand together for a time in silence and Ray mostly attends to his scotch, which is just as bad as Malcolm warned him it would be. They watch people pretending not to watch them, or even more studiously pretending not to be curious about the sorts of things Ray and Malcolm might be discussing. It is more mind numbing than Ray had even imagined.

Finally, Malcolm says, "Can I ask you about the *Paraclete* disaster?"

"No."

"How about your relationship with Emma Whiston? She seems awfully fond of you."

"No."

"Look, Marlowe, let me be straight with you. I don't really care much about the Whiston family's private lives, okay? I don't care who they're screwing or what clothes they're wearing or where they're investing their fortune, but my readers do care. We're a small colony where not much happens, and this retarded branch of a great business family is the closest thing to gossip that we've got. My readers need something interesting to focus on, and the Whistons are that something, even if they wouldn't garner so much as an inch of copy on a real planet with real media. They're not really famous, not the way you think about fame on Terra. They're names, and they're locally powerful and they have an interesting history. Now this *Paraclete* thing is legitimate news. It's a hard story with serious ramifications for colonial life. If that's out of bounds, and I can't even get at it obliquely by probing your connection to the Whistons, I've got a big handful of nothing. So give me a break, okay? Understand that no one in this room really cares about airing the family laundry." Malcolm purses his lips in disappointment. "What can we talk about?"

Ray gives the question a few seconds of thought. "Did the Red Sox play today?"

"You mean baseball?" More confusion. "I guess so. Haven't seen the wire feed since we went to press this afternoon. I think they were pitching Marshall. Against the Yankees, at New Fenway."

"Bah. Marshall's shoulder negates any advantage they might have pulled from the home field. He'll give them

four and a half, maybe five if they're lucky, but the bullpen is a disaster waiting to happen." Ray takes another slug of the scotch and scans the room once again, marking the shift in traffic between groups, who seems most interested in talking to whom. It's more habit than an actual, useful portion of his skillset in this environment. He still isn't entirely certain who half these people are. "Who's that older guy with Frederick."

"Charcoal suit? Big smile? Vague aura of soul-searing evil about him? That's Townshend Wright. He's the President, Board of Directors, of Whelemat. The wigs don't get much bigger around here than those two. In fact, probably ninety percent of New Holyoke's trade equity is represented in this room. You and I excluded, of course." Malcolm flips his head back in Ray's direction, casual and wary. "Do I get to ask a question now?"

"As long as it's within bounds."

"What bounds?"

Ray peers at him with his most stark and intimidating glare. "Nothing about bedmates or business which wouldn't be mine to talk about. Nothing about *Paraclete* that would fall under the purview of EED's investigation. Anything else I decide I don't want to talk about. And if you print anything about me or attributed to me that I didn't say or starts rumors that I don't like, you can more than likely expect to receive a clandestine, night-time and probably violent visit in the very near future. How's that?"

Malcolm swallows hard. After a pause, he says, "Fair enough."

A longer pause follows, and Ray says, "So?"

"I'm thinking."

"What's there to think about? You newspaper guys always have questions."

"I'm trying to find one that won't get me killed." Malcolm clears his throat, grins weakly. "Um, what's your take on the radical Lilaiken independence movement's failure so far to take responsibility for the this most recent incident."

"What does EED have to say about it?"

"They're not commenting pending the results of their investigation."

"How have the Lilaikens taken credit in the past?"

"Somebody calls all the major news outlets, gives a shouting, largely political and incoherent monologue, then says they blew up such-and-such a ship in a quadrant with these coordinates."

"Maybe you haven't paid your comm port bill."

Malcolm rolls his eyes. "Like they'd call me anyway. Maybe the *wire feed* didn't pay its bill."

Ray shakes his head. "I don't know."

"Is that a 'no comment'?"

"That's an 'I don't know'." He imagines how that will read in the press. HIGH RANKING MILITARY OFFICER ADMITS COMPLETE BAFFLEMENT OVER LATEST DISASTER. Jack Holcomb and the boys at CIU would love that.

"Understand, I'm not really in the intelligence loop around here yet. Maybe they were disappointed with the way you guys broke the last story. Maybe they're tired of not getting any results when they blab to the media so they're taking their rhetoric straight to EED instead. Maybe EED is sitting on the message to see if anybody notices--but more likely, maybe EED just forgot to draft an official statement releasing this information to the media rubes. It happens."

Malcolm's brow furrows. "Forgot? Do I look stupid to you?"

"Hm. I'm tempted to answer that one, but it isn't your turn to ask the question."

"Fine. Do you think I'd really have to depend on official EED tripe to break a story? You're insulting me."

"Then maybe no one took credit."

"Now we're talking. Wouldn't that strike you as ominous?"

"Actually, it would strike me as a sign that this movement is growing out of the glorymongering redundancy the act of taking credit implies. Taking credit is always about public reaction, about exposure, generating hype. It's advertising. The people who deal with incidents like this don't need a terrorist's comm call to identify the suspect pool." Ray hopes fervently that this sounds convincing, because the truth is that he does find it ominous and baffling and annoying. And he wonders why Colonel Ritchie didn't bother to share tidbits of information like it this afternoon. "Okay, newspaperman, I gave you a freebie. Now it's my turn: What's your personal take on the local scene's sympathies toward the radical Lilaiken movement?"

"The radical movement, as divorced from the moderate political ideology?"

"Sure."

"Then it's hardly accurate to characterize the situation as sympathetic at all. A couple of years ago, we'd receive the odd pro-Lilaiken position letter at the paper. Lots of complaints about the way EED handles the shipping lanes, complaints about Forum taxation without a clear local benefit in return. Like most of the frontier colonies, people want to complain about the money taken out of their pockets and the perceived lack of political voice back on Terra, but they don't think about the fact that being ignored except for the tax burden can be a good thing. We get to mostly run our own affairs and the Forum, the FSA and the EED don't intervene. The letters stopped about the time the violence began. I don't think anybody really wants to be associated with that." Malcolm finishes with a shrug, like more bafflement. "You don't really think that New Holyoke is a hotbed of Lilaiken politics, do you?"

"Can you think of a reason why I wouldn't? Because I can think of at least five reasons why I should."

Malcolm flushes, as though Ray has just insulted him. "That's hardly fair. Other than the first one and the most recent, we've stayed fairly clear of Lilaiken rhetoric, let alone visible presence. It's a pretty common understanding around here that New Holyoke is incidental to the attacks, despite the fact that the first one happened in our grid space. We're just as much victims in these events as EED is. If they choose to use our space to set an example, there's not much we can do about it. But believe me, if the attacks were being coordinated from here, we'd have found out about it."

"A planet is a big place, Mr. Malcolm. Lots of territory for a few bad people to operate in with little risk of detection."

"Yes, but also relatively few comm signals to hide their messages in."

Ray barely nods at his argument. "And fewer resources with which to track the comm traffic, so it's still a pretty intimidating level of anonymity."

Malcolm chews on that for a few seconds, then shakes his head again. "Not everyone thinks New Holyoke is complicit in Lilaiken violence."

"If you mean everyone in human space, I'd say you're probably right. But if by 'everyone' you mean EED, then you're more than likely wrong. New Holyoke and the frontier worlds are acquiring a very unseemly reputation as a shipping destination. New Holyoke in particular, I would point out, because this is where it all started, and now it has the dubious record of have produced *twice* as many Lilaiken events as any other frontier system. You might want to alert your loyal readership to the possibility of a shift in trade interest. Terran manufacturers are only going to ship here so long as your planet is an attractive and lucrative market. When it begins to cost more than the trouble is worth, they'll begin to bail out, which means that the mining operation folds because there are no carriers to haul the ore to market. Settlement folds because no one can get here. Is New Holyoke ready to be completely self-sufficient? If no one ships here and settlement freezes, the Lilaikens win your independence from the Forum by default. If something isn't done soon, you might just find out what independence from the Forum and its oppressive apparatus really means."

Malcolm looks at him, suddenly pale. "That sounds like a threat."

But Ray puts his hands up to stop him, before he takes the thrust too far. "Don't confuse the opinions of the rank and file with the official position of military or the Forum. I'm just making an observation about the power of public perceptions."

Relieved, Malcolm exhales a long breath. "*Your* perceptions might be a little skewed by recent events."

The problem, Ray has learned, with the really effective terrorist organizations is that they're good at convincing the people around them that they're not there, that they're somewhere else. Some other neighborhood, city, planet. It just makes his job more difficult.

After a time, Malcolm says, "Do you plan to be with us for awhile, Commander?"

"As long as it takes the FSA to figure out what to do with me. Why do you ask?"

Malcolm shoves his hands into his trouser pockets. "I just wonder. Do you mind if I make an observation of my own?"

"Go ahead."

"I spend maybe more than my share of time around EED guys as part of gathering the news. You want to know what shuts them up faster than anything else? Talking about Lilaikens. Now you, on the other hand, as soon as I bring it up, it's the *only* topic you warm to." Malcolm looks significantly at Ray, like one of them has inadvertently let slip a secret. "On the one hand, that could be a function of your recent harrowing experience, which I would both understand and appreciate. But then I wouldn't expect you to have such completely formed and coherent opinions on the matter. The fact that you do suggests to me that you've given this quite a bit of thought."

"It's a long voyage from Strat," Ray informs him. "Lots of time to think coherently about flying into the teeth of Lilaiken space."

"Maybe. Can I ask what exactly it was that you did aboard *Paraclete*? I mean, it isn't exactly standard procedure for EED to launch a starship with two Commander level officers on board. And you are definitely

not the Captain of record for that ship."

Ray scowls at him. He was so much more happily anonymous when he was just a gunny sergeant. "You're about to step out of bounds."

"And I'm not the only one who's going to be asking that question."

Which is probably true. Ray says, "And what would you speculate is the answer?"

"That EED has decided it's time to investigate the Lilaiken incidents a little more thoroughly than has been done in the past, that maybe someone has finally realized that a podunk outpost like the one we have isn't up to the task at hand because of its insufficient resources. I'd speculate that you were heading up the infusion of investigative talent. Or at least you were, prior to the most recent events."

"It might not be entirely stupid of you to reach that conclusion," Ray returns, lowering his voice. He's pleased to have gotten off with less than half of the truth. "But it would be stupid for you to take that conclusion and print it as though it was verifiable fact."

Malcolm's eyes begin to twinkle. "And what do I get in return for choosing not to exercise my rights as citizen and publisher?"

"Freedom from long, agonizing medical rehabilitation for one," Ray responds, carefully expressionless. "Or, a quiet promise to receive preferential treatment when there is more than just speculation to print."

"And in the meantime?"

"In the meantime, you run an article based on my comments which is critical of the Lilaiken position--and I mean a flat-out scare sheet that is blatantly designed to evoke hostility between the financial interests of the population and the Lilaiken ideals. With any luck, it will flush an interesting bird or two out of the thicket."

Malcolm seems to find this tactic rather amusing. "You're that desperate for leads

"Yes."

"Well, then I wish you the best, Commander Marlowe. And I hope you enjoy New Holyoke's hospitality, because you're more than likely going to receive it for a long time to come."

"Thank you for being so supportive."

Malcolm slaps Ray companionably on the shoulder. "If you knew anything at all, you'd recognize that I just gave you an extremely generous benefit of the doubt. You have a lot to learn about the local socio-political scene. It should be fun watching you blunder through it."

Ray would like to ask him to explain what he means in greater detail, but they're out of time. There is a conspicuous shuffling and banging near the entrance into the hall. A handful of domestics scurry from a side passage and peel the doors open. There is Emma, clapping her hands as she enters to gain everyone's attention.

She is smiling, teeth and gums, her chin high and eyes exultant.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please accept my most sincere gratitude for honoring our return to Blackheath Grange with your presence and for the courtesy you have shown our esteemed guest, Commander Marlowe. The

warmth and joy that fills my heart at seeing you all gathered here again is second only in intensity to that which pleases me most of all, which is to announce the unexpected arrival of your true hostess for the evening, my mother Dame Whiston, Juliet."

As soon as she says it, there is a collective gasp. Ray can't tell if it's actual astonishment or just a fabricated but reasonable facsimile thereof, because such a reaction is obviously expected.

Emma bows delicately before them and slips off to the side. Behind her, confined to a wheelchair which is propelled by Amah's imposing figure, Emma's mother enters the room. The chair is old, wicker and rattan, with oversized wheels that creak as it moves. The woman seated in it is dwarfed in relation, a wisp of flesh and fabric. She is fine, elegant, pale as bone. Her hair is as white as Michigan snowfall, cut to her shoulders and curled into precise rolls like the eyelashes of sleeping children. Hair complements gown, which is gossamer lace, long sleeved, shrouds her from neck to ankle. It cannot adequately conceal the fact that she is a withered and wasted specimen, that her arms are twigs and her chest thin, reedy, that when Amah urges the chair forward, Juliet Whiston's head flops forward as though her neck isn't strong enough anymore to bear its weight.

But she enters, and she waves at her guests and offers them a crooked smile.

At Ray's side, Malcolm mutters, "This should be surreal."

Ray glances at him, questioning, but Malcolm only shrugs his shoulders and redirects Ray's attention back to Emma and her mother. "You'll see, Mr. Marlowe. Believe me."

Even from across the room, Ray can detect Dame Whiston scanning, scanning, ultimately settling on him. Emma has her eyes, the same impossible, frozen, glacier blue. Juliet Whiston looks at him, and doesn't wave, but waggles her pointer finger at him, bidding him to approach.

Meeting the mother, Ray thinks, his knees suddenly weak, like cornstalks after too much rain. He sets his tumbler on the bar and manages a succession of flops and skids and stumbles from one side of the dining room to the other. By the time he reaches her, he feels breathless, terrified, wishing someone would roll a grenade into the room so he could fall on it and spare them all further embarrassment.

But no grenades are forthcoming, and while the other guests stand back and watch him try to melt into the floor, Juliet Whiston traces him with lidded, penetrating eyes.

"You are the one, aren't you?" She says finally, nearly smiling, somehow satisfied. Her voice is soft, raspy, as ancient and shattered as the woman herself. "I'm pleased to meet you, Commander Marlowe. Very pleased, in fact, since I have been told that you have performed miraculous deeds to bring my children home to me."

He wasn't this nervous when he was back in New Mes shuttling generals around the combat grid and charged with keeping them alive. Then again, he's known more generals than mothers over the past few years, so it makes a bizarre sort of sense.

"Miraculous may be a bit of an exaggeration, ma'am. But I'm happy to meet you, even given the circumstances, and glad to find your health improved."

"Improved may be a bit of an exaggeration itself, but I am well enough to make a public display of gratitude to my daughter's rescuer, Mr. Marlowe."

"Please, if it isn't a terrible breach of etiquette, call me Ray."

"It would be shocking, indeed." Her eyes sparkle with mischief for an instant. "So I will most certainly do it, Ray. But you must still call me Dame Whiston, or people will talk."

Emma apparently inherited more from her mother than just the eyes.

Behind Juliet Whiston, Amah watches their exchange frowning, her hands clutching the frame of the wheelchair and the tattooed graffiti of her face drawn up into a scowl like a fist. It is a distinctly bad vibe, which Ray feels is the last thing he needs right now.

The old woman continues, "You have arrived at an auspicious time, tragedy notwithstanding. What is today, Amah?"

Growling. "Tuesday, Juliet."

She laughs, a pleasant chuckle that becomes a cackle of age. "A Terran trapping. *Gittungdae*, that's what it is. We make these concessions to off-worlders and aliens, Ray. You can take a person out of their home, cast them into a new solar system with more hours, less hours, more days, fewer months, but you can't take them out of *time*. They won't stand for it. Time and season, the drag of age, the spirit of being and particular place are stamped onto the soul, those things never change.

"But Tuesday it is, which means that Wednesday follows and Thursday and Friday after, and then sundown, and at sundown, what?"

Juliet casts her eyes over Ray expectantly, arching one eyebrow. He doesn't know the answer she wants from him. Confused or exasperated, she prompts him. "*Dao Maed Vitouri*. Mourning Day? The Festival of Loss?"

The gaze shifts to Emma, disappointed and faintly accusatory. "Have you told him nothing?"

"It's only been a day, mother," Emma says quietly. "He's hardly been off the estate to learn such things, as we've had our hands full in settling the children and attending to Frederick's condition, not to mention...."

Juliet abruptly shifts her attention back to Ray, waves him forward and leans in as he approaches, so that her elbows are practically resting on her knees. She speaks in hushed, confidential tones. "This is what I mean, you see? The death of courtesy--that is what the frontier is, what it ultimately means. You are *the one*, and even so they neglect to share with you even the smallest details about what things mean. This is what the frontier does; it strips us down to essentials, imposes upon us that which is raw, sun-blistered and soil-rhythmic. Tuesday, indeed, and that's all you've been told! Shame. But don't mention a word of it, young man, not to any of the jackals in this hall. It's our secret."

Straightening her spine, raising her voice. "Emma, darling, I tell you that you've been derelict in your social duties. In the morning, very first thing, you will make it a priority to acquaint our friend Ray, to whom we owe such a debt of gratitude, with his new world. Is that understood? In the morning, if not sooner. Yes, yes, I remember what it was to be young, to drink life, to ramble about at all hours and then fall resisting into sleep as though it was a burden. Take him into your hands and show him everything."

But she jabs a sudden, sharp finger at Ray, glaring, imperious, fierce. "But mind that you take her *only* by the hand, Mr. Marlowe."

He is completely bewildered. Ray withdraws a step, blinks to maintain some sense of composure. "Of course, Dame Whiston."

Then Emma slides between them, obscuring her mother's view of him, all gentle smiles and soft words. "Don't

worry, mother. I'll make certain he's acquainted with everything, just as you say." She exchanges a flurry of muted expressions with Amah, a silent communication that concludes when Amah nods. "Perhaps you should take a few moments and greet the other guests now? Mr. Penberthy is desperate to see you, I know."

Juliet makes a snorting noise. "That old scoundrel! Is he still alive?"

"Why don't you go see for yourself? We only have a few minutes before dinner is supposed to begin."

They roll away, Dame Whiston chattering like a loon, Amah both pushing her forward and hovering over her, off to harangue the unfortunate Mr. Penberthy. Now at Ray's side, Emma slumps, pressing her weight against him as though she would fall if he wasn't there to catch her.

Emma's mother. Juliet Whiston. She must be all of fifty years old, and absolutely batshit crazy.

"I'm sorry," Emma says after a few moments. "She seemed stronger up in her room, when we were dressing her for the evening. I really thought she'd get through dinner without embarrassing herself."

Ray still doesn't know what to say, and the only word that pops into his mind is the one Malcolm gave him. *Surreal.*

But Emma shakes her head, gathers herself and reassembles her public display of smiling gaiety. "I need to speak with the kitchen staff and have them begin seating the guests. Amah will take responsibility for mother in the meantime." She lifts her face to Ray, eyes shining again, but her mouth is hard, trying to curl into a frown. "She likes you, you know. I haven't seen her so animated in months, possibly in years. She thinks you're smashing."

"I'm glad."

Which probably ranks right up there with one of the stupidest after-meeting-the-mad-mother comments of all time. Rather impressive actually, given the fact that in his experience most mothers were certifiably insane to one degree or another.

Emma must be scoring him for effort though, because she winks and the smile softens a bit into something less obviously forced. "Just remember that. As the guest of honor, you get to spend the evening at her right hand."

The food is actually quite impressive.

Pheasant, lamb, filet mignon. Chilled salads and exquisitely fresh assortments of vegetables, which is something Ray can appreciate in a boyhood Hoosier nostalgia sort of fashion after months and months and months on end of canned, tepid imitations of grown green foods. Lively colors, interesting arrangements, curious flavor interactions. If he actually knew his way around a kitchen beyond being able to find the coffee pot, he suspects he would be devastated by the culinary art in evidence.

Instead, he knows only what his stomach likes, and it seems to like all of it, to make regular attempts to climb with breathless anticipation up the shaft of his esophagus and try to peer out his mouth every time the doors to the kitchen swing open and some new item is brought out, be it a spinach noodle casserole or obscenely jiggling iced gelatin dessert.

He sits at the corner of the long table, with Juliet Whiston to his left and Emma across from him. Townshend

Wright, the Whelemat president, is seated to his right and Frederick Whiston beside his sister. Ray suspects there is some arcane but logical order to the rest of the seating arrangements, something having to do with social relationships and hierarchy--mostly because Thomas Malcolm is shifted way down at the other end, occluded by bushels of towering centerpieces--that Ray could figure out with a piece of scratch paper, a pencil and an advanced degree in higher mathematics.

Amah stands watch immediately behind the high back of Dame Whiston's chair, still scowling, her dark eyes alternately scanning the guests and her employer, her heavy arms directing the traffic of domestics as they serve and gather dishes and keep the wine glasses filled. Which should, in Ray's estimation, keep Frederick happy at least. Freddy, who has two days of dry docking to make up for, has plunged from wine, to gin and tonic, to vodka, as though he's searching for the vivacity the occasion demands, but all he seems to find is a sort of brooding, heavy-browed depression. His plate is clean, empty, dancing with light reflected from the chandelier.

The conversation hums around them, light and airy, punctuated with laughter and the tink of silverware and glass, the cacophonic orchestral accompaniment of another world spanned by dimensional barriers and space-time boundaries that cannot be crossed.

"*Dao Maed Vitouri*," Juliet Whiston says after a time, her soft hand on Ray's forearm. "The Festival of Loss. You should go. Emma should take you. It's very auspicious."

Ray studies her hand, blue veins wriggling and pulsing like worms beneath the alabaster veneer of her skin. He looks away, raises his head so that he can watch her eyes, which he prefers because they are clear, lucid, familiar.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," he says. "This is a colonial holiday?"

"Holy day," Juliet says, stressing each word. "Holy days. From sundown on Friday to sundown on Sunday. *Asima Ephendae etri Foridae asimen*. That is the law. You'll see. The town makes a grand spectacle of the holy days."

"Think Christmas," Towshend Wright says beside him in a gruff baritone. He looks sidelong at Ray, swirling the remains of his wine around in his glass, bored or disdainful. "Lanterns, pleasantries, gifts for the children. We'll shut down the mine for three days. It's very Roman Catholic."

"It is not Catholic," Amah rumbles at him, disapproving.

"Distinctly Catholic," Wright counters. "In a medieval sense. The law mandates that all secular operations close. Equinoctial celebration is authentically human, apparently moreso than fiscal responsibility."

Ray can only shift from Wright to Amah to Juliet, baffled. Seeing him, Emma grins, touches her lips with a pale linen napkin. "Mr. Wright is correct when he says that it is the law that we close the mines for the Festival. It makes him grumpy, so that he has a tendency to overstate his case, I'm afraid. He does considerable violence to the truth with his Christmas analogy."

Wright makes a disgusted noise like he's going to protest, but stifles it.

Emma goes on, "*Dao Maed Vitouri* is Dag Maoudi in origin, at least the language and basic concept. Remember, I told you about the Whiston family's history with Amah's clan. We have at times over the years adopted Dag Maoudi customs, phrases, modes of communication. Grandfather Fram was a particularly astute student of the culture. For the original Dag Maoudi, it was an autumnal festival, a transition from the fattened summer growing season to the bitter depredations of winter." Emma glances up to Amah, who nods her

approval, so she continues. "It made sense, given the mythological underpinnings, that this also became a time of remembrance, of mourning warriors lost in tribal wars during the year and reflecting upon the time of peace to come. The Dag Maoudi did not make war in the winter. Instead, they gathered food, built homes, mended clothing, made love and babies, and when spring rolled around again, the villages were alive with children, flowers, grunting pigs and squawking birds. *Dao Maed Vitouri* was all of these things, commemorating the dead, recognizing the burden of the immediate future, celebrating the eternal rebirth that would follow their travails. It was a celebration of what it meant to be Dag Maoudi in a world free from any influence that was not their own.

"When the *Fandalay* made planetfall on New Holyoke, it had been just over two years since the first colonists had departed from Terran space. Two years of hoping and dreaming, catastrophe and fear. Interstellar travel had more risk in those days. It was not a light undertaking, transporting so many settlers from star to star. Some died in transit. There were accidents, incidents, disasters. Some were born, still nursing at their mothers' breasts, extra-solar children without planets, homes, starfields to call their own.

"There are people who argue still that Grandfather Fram held the *Fandalay* in orbit for three weeks not charting the stars, as his log claims, or making final preparations, but waiting, waiting for dawn on the autumnal equinox before herding the congregation into shuttles and dropships. It took all day to ferry them, and it wasn't until sundown on Friday, *asima Ephendae*, that they stood together, at last, on the virgin soil of a new world.

"And Fram gathered them and said that they would make no labor for two full days, that instead they would reflect upon their companions who had been lost along the way, and they would mourn them and remember all the things those people had done and contributed for the good and the life of the colony. And then they would think about the children, the newborn, the Placeless as he called them. And from the Placeless, the unhomed, they would take hope.

"On Sunday evening, grandfather planted the first pines along the cliffs, one sapling transported from Terra for each of the children born in transit, as a promise to them especially that they would no longer be Placeless, but rooted, human, bound to the land and the sea, embraced by the arms of the world they would make. *Dao Maed Vitouri* reminds us that we are not just a colony, but a people, a clan, our past and futures all bound up together with this world, New Holyoke. We remember what makes us human."

Juliet Whiston listens closely, and claps her hands together softly, her face aglow. "Oh, yes. The Festival is such an auspicious time. So many don't understand anymore; they choose not to remember to roots that run deep. But the Whistons remember. I remember." She leans in conspiratorial fashion toward Ray, almost upsetting her wine glass in the process. Her voice drops to a throaty whisper. "I can tell you about my first Festival, young man. I remember it clearly, in every detail."

"From when you were a child?" Ray asks. He's trying to keep up with her dopplering intuitive leaps, but senses himself falling short. It's a territory without a map.

But Juliet giggles like a little girl. "Of course not, silly. My first *adult Dao*. Oh, I was seventeen or eighteen Terran years then. Years after I had stepped off the *Morrigu*, wooed to New Holyoke by the Trust and courted by a young man whose name I will not say now. Eighteen and splendid in a fine, taffeta gown, silk and lace, and my hair long. Glorious beyond your contemplation. There were streets and side avenues, they shimmered with lanterns hung from poles, candles in windows and littering doorstoops. Everything was flicker and flicker and dim like a great bonfire overhung the city. And there was singing in the plaza beneath the memorial, gentlemen young and old in dark suits and shining shoes, lined along the green--"

Behind her, Amah looms, settles her fists on Juliet's frail shoulders. Pats her, shushing. "That's enough, my dear Juliet. You're going to bore poor Mr. Marlowe. You were very beautiful then. You are still beautiful.

These things he can see."

"Of course he can see!" the old woman snaps. "But he doesn't *know*. You've told him nothing. Why bring him unless you're going to tell him? You'll wait until it's too late."

There is a collective pause; the Whiston guests strain their necks in curiosity at Juliet's intensity. Ray senses them watching, fascinated, titillated, alarmed.

He wants to hush her too, before she creates a spectacle. Emma, her back straight, eyes wide, appears ready to spring from her chair, but doesn't move.

Juliet struggles with her briefly, but Amah is relentless, drags her away from the table.

"You're just going to exhaust yourself, Dame Whiston," Amah says, chiding but firm. "This evening has perhaps been too taxing for you."

"I don't want to go yet. I haven't told him about Charles. Charles and the *mhuruk-a*."

Amah spins her about so that they face one another, Amah gripping the sides of the chair, bent at the waist, confronting Juliet Whiston as though she was a precocious child. "He doesn't want to hear you tell of Charles. We will go to back to your room, I think. Bid your guests good night."

But Juliet ducks beneath her arm, gives Ray a wicked grin and wink. "I sucked his cock, Ray. I sucked all their cocks, and then I let them fuck me. It's the spirit of the place."

For a moment, stunned silence fills the room, conversation and glasses stilled. Someone he doesn't see inhales sharply. Ray feels their eyes on him, and alternately on Juliet Whiston, too shocked to do anything but observe. And Ray, he too can only watch, paddling along out of his depth. It is a complete nightmare.

He implores Amah, unspeaking: Please, get her out of here.

Frederick, muttering curses, is the one who finally intervenes. He lurches unsteadily to his feet, flushed and bitter, wine glass in hand. "Bloody hell, Emma, how long are you going to let this go on? Just tell him, for God's sake. He's going to find out soon enough...or would you rather sit there and see our mother made the fool for this gathering of vultures?"

He glares down at Emma, who stares at the remains of her dinner, ashen, unseeing. She no longer looks as though she's coiling to leap to her mother's rescue. The spring inside her has snapped, and she slumps.

"Sit down, Frederick," Amah barks, her voice edged and steel. "There has been enough embarrassment already."

"*Embarrassment*?" He hisses back. "Is that all? Maybe this family needs a bit of embarrassment." Frederick spins his head toward Ray, frowning, smiling, savage--all of those at once, as though he can't settle on the appropriate expression for such a disaster. It makes him look mad, like he's raving. "What do you think, Mr. Marlowe? Do you think this family could use another rescue? A rescue from itself, perhaps? From our own pomposity?"

"I think you should sit down," Ray says. You murderer. Mass murderer. Killer of children.

"Or what? Or you'll make me sit down again?" He laughs bitterly and shuffles over to stand behind Emma. "I don't really care what you *think*, Ray. You don't know enough to *think* anything yet. You haven't been told. Or

aren't you paying attention? Our misguided mother has been trying to tell you all night, but you refuse to listen, to heed what is in your best interest. Call her mad if you want, but at least she is direct; she recognizes what is essential. This is a big affair, you understand, plotting when you will be told and how much. How you will be told."

In a fit, like sudden rage, Frederick hurls his glass against the wall where it shatters, spraying glass and leaving behind a dark, purple stain.

"I'll save everyone the trouble, eh? Tell you man to man about the *Dao*. You'll like that, I think. Direct, factual, blunt. Very military. We understand things, you and I, on a mannish level. None of that pleasant and fluttering delicacy for us. It's hardly sporting for you not to know, really, considering how close you're becoming, with sweet, little Emma." He drops his hands onto Emma's shoulders, and she winces at his touch. Frederick casts his voice louder, including the entire room in his rambling assault. As if he didn't already hold their attention. "Show of hands, ladies and gentlemen, who *doesn't* know about the *Dao*?"

No hands, stony, shocked, glitter-eyed expressions. Townshend Wright chuckles.

"Tell him, tell him!" Juliet crows, peeking around the obstruction of Amah's body.

But Amah takes a step toward him, darkly menacing. "Frederick. That's enough."

He ignores her, and his pale, broad hands gently knead the Emma's bare shoulders, his fingers flicker along her neck. Emma stares at nothing, her mouth a thin line like she's swallowing shame.

And Frederick smiles, pure malice. "Spirit of the place, Ray. That's the meaning of the *Dao*. Sweet, soft, precious Emma knows all about the spirit of the place, the *mhuruk-a*. All the Whiston women do. It's why everyone comes. Everyone comes and everyone comes, hah! They line up around the block, all the way down the street for a taste of my little sister, just as they did for my mother. My grandmother. Don't you think that makes me proud?"

Ray stares at him, unable to lock in, unable to feel anything but a profound numbness. What the--? And Frederick goes on, stroking Emma's shoulders, her neck, ringing his fingers around her throat as she hangs her head and everyone watches. Townshend Wright, flushed and sweating, watches too, his eyes fixed and shining, his mouth open in a perpetual chuckle of delight. Ray stares at him in turn, and it's like his eyes are bulging, ready to burst, burning. Wright has an erection the size of weather satellite straining the thin fabric of his trousers.

"Hey," Frederick says at last. "You'll have a good time. I promise. The Whiston family will make absolutely certain you do. Front of the line, right, Emma?"

It's all he can stand. He might not understand this, what is happening around him, why everyone sits quietly and lets it happen. He might not understand their precious *Dao* or their social rituals. And he doesn't care.

Ray pushes his chair back and rises.

Madly cackling, Juliet Whiston barks, "Clear a space! We'll start early! Mhuruk-a! Mhuruk-a!"

He ignores her as he goes past, pausing only to spare Amah a glower of disgust because she saw this coming, because she could have stopped it, should have. Didn't.

Then he's standing at Emma's side, face to face with Frederick Whiston, breathing pungent and recycled alcohol fumes.

Calmly, almost preternaturally so, he says, "I know what you did. I know, and I'm going to see you punished for it. You want to speak bluntly? That's fine. The only reason you're still free to walk about, causing harm, hurting those around you, is because I don't have the information I need to put you away. I don't have it, but I'll get it. You can count on that. But that doesn't change the fact that it's coming for you. *I'm* coming for you. So you can take your hands off of her and shut your mouth, or you can keep going, keep hurting her, and I'll put paid to your account now, evidence or not. Your choice."

And he's ready, right now, despite the consequences and without any evidence to support him. It would give him great pleasure to snap Frederick Whiston's spine at this moment. So he could never hurt Emma or anyone else again.

Frederick does not move at once, does not seem to do anything at all.

"Take your hands off of her," Ray whispers, so low and harsh and hissed only the two of them can hear it.

Frederick blinks at him as if the command is beyond comprehension. Unthinkable. But he meets Ray's growling, simmering violence with a steady gaze, his voice subdued, almost apologetic.

"It's for your own good, Ray."

But he moves his hands, which is good, because Ray isn't sure how much longer he can restrain himself from killing someone. He withdraws, puts several paces between them, until he's bumping into the wall. But Frederick Whiston has ceased to exist in Ray's universe. All he knows is Emma, shamed, horrified, aching. He bends toward her, takes her small hands from her lap and pulls her to her feet. She doesn't look at him, and that hurts most of all, because it feels like he has failed her.

Without another word, Ray casts his arm around her shoulder and pulls Emma from the room.

At his back, Dame Whiston--mad, crazy, fragile Juliet--laughs and laughs until her voice sounds strained and broken, like the distant echo of tears.

Chapter Five

Night. Stars so bright they seem to hang within arms' reach. Constellations without name, without history. It is a sky without context, beneath which he drifts, a lurching planet unmoored from any coherent orbit. In the darkness relieved only by the dim cones that mark the edges of the path, he holds her close as they walk, shielding her from the chill in the air. She is unspeaking, trembling, but if she cries, she conceals it from him, and he can't see her face.

They take paths that lead away from the guest cottage, ranging out across the tumbling hillocks and scorched moor. She seems to select routes at random, wandering, just putting space between herself and the manor house. Ray lets her lead, responding only to the gentle tug of her flesh, the subtle twist of limb and muscle when she changes direction. He doesn't ask where they're going, only follows.

In time, there is a wall of dark, irregular stones, waist high and uneven like a structure assembled from children's blocks. A bit farther, an iron gate and a small building like a shed tucked inside. Emma separates from him, opens the door and leans inside. She flips a switch he doesn't see, but can hear, the resonant *thunk* of connections closed, the hum of electricity. Lights stutter, pop, spring into argent life on tall, decorative poles. They glare, bleaching the grass into monochrome tints, creating shadows that are darker than the night itself.

"This was my grandmother's garden," she says quietly. "Men build houses and call it a legacy. Women plant gardens. My mother tended this one when she was young, following grandmother's example. A Terran garden in an alien land. I would come here when I was a child, sometimes Frederick too, but mostly just me. It was the only place I was allowed to be alone. This is my place, my secret garden where no one comes unless I choose to allow it."

She swipes the trail of old tears from beneath her eyes and tries to smile at him, but it is grim, broken. Ray steps toward her, ready to take her into his arms, but she holds her hand up between them.

"You don't have to touch me. I understand if you don't want to. Just don't pity me and call it love."

It doesn't stop him. He wraps himself around her, draws her face into his chest and presses his nose against her hair so he can smell her pure, clean scent.

"I really don't care what Frederick has to say. I don't care about the *Dao*. Only you."

And eventually, she understands, and she lets him hold her, finally grips his arms with her hands.

"Walk with me," she says. "Let me show you my garden."

He lets her lead again, take him by the hand down curious, meandering paths. They pass through floral bowers, yellow petalled and smelling of saffron. Purple and red tulip detonations, stark beneath the artificial lighting, their green stalks and razor leaves straight, vibrant, perfect. Groves of trees, some he recognizes. Hoary sassafras, rough-barked oaks, elephant-skinned sycamore. With autumn looming, the leaves are yellow, crimson, brown, scented with must and decay, littering the grass and the path. He sees these things from the outside, under the lights, but beneath the boughs, there are only shadows and glimmerings, odor and touch, the crackle of dried leaves and the snap of twigs beneath their feet.

Deep inside, when they've lost the path and sight of the walls, they find a stone bench beneath a glorious and broad-leafed cedar. A dense battalion of saplings clusters about them, strangled by the towering limbs of the cedar, hemming them in. The wind blows; the branches creak; the faint light that reaches them shifts in uncertain patterns.

They sit, and the stone is cool and damp. Ray listens to the steady rhythm of Emma's breath, but he can see only the outline of her body, her bare arms and shoulders, like hints of moonbeam. Otherwise she is invisible, impenetrable.

She speaks to him then, in a subdued voice like formulated, granular shame.

"In some rural corners of America, in places where the mountains are weathered and ancient, where science hasn't intruded upon mystery, there are people who rise early on Sunday mornings. They don their nicest suits and pretty, lemon dresses, shine their shoes and smooth their hair into appealing fashions. They climb into their fancy cars and drive along highways through bustling small towns, listening to radios, humming along with songs they know or catching up on the morning news. They turn off onto gravel roads, then rutted dirt tracks, eventually into rolling green fields wedged between mist shrouded hills. In these out of the way places are churches, white clapboard, towering steeples, floors and pews that are so aged they groan when you walk across them, settle into them. Golden sunlight shafts through the tall windows, and they sing hymns with an organ, songs written before they were born, before their parents were born. Some even older than that, songs they've sung in churches like the one they're in now for generations. People stand up and talk about how grand God is, how he's saved them from this or that, what they would like him to save them from next. Then they sing a bit more, and they pass the collection plate, and eventually the minister ascends to the pulpit with a tattered Bible in his hands and he harangues them about sin and hell.

"And when he's finished, young men rise and come to the front up near the altar, and carefully, reverently, they shift the first pews against the far wall. Someone else approaches, through the back door, up the center aisle, bearing a wooden box with round holes punched in the lid. He sets it on the floor there in front of the pulpit. The organ begins to play, and people sing again. Most of them sing, but some are removing the lid from the box, reaching inside, taking up snakes, long and sinuous and full of poison, just like they imagine Moses did. And they believe that if the snake bites them, if it drives a stream of venom into their bloodstream, that they will not die. They are entranced by the snake and the promises written in their Bibles and faith. It is an ecstatic experience.

"And when the singing is over and the snakes dropped back into the box, they bid one another good morning and they get back into their cars and drive along the highways back to their houses, to lunch, to ordinary life that has nothing to do with snakes and faith. Monday morning they rise early and go to work, doing whatever it is that they do. I don't know what that's like. I wonder if they carry that experience with them from Monday to Saturday, the ecstasy of the snake, of pure faith and experience and promise. Does it change them? Does the ecstasy have the substance of reality? Do they dream of snakes when they sleep?

"But mostly I wonder by which activity they define themselves? Are they Monday through Saturday and the snakes are hobby, aberration, lark? Or are they Sunday, and the rest of reality just an unpleasant but necessary intrusion on ecstasy? Do they even know who they are?"

"I don't know," Ray answers. "What do you think?"

Emma breathes deeply, and the exhale sounds like self-deprecating laughter. "I'm not being any more coherent than my mother, am I?"

"This is about the *Dao*."

"The things my mother said, they're so...wrong. It was never like that. She's forgotten the way it was; the way it is."

They line up around the block, all the way down the street for a taste of my little sister

"Tell me."

She sighs, sitting there, hands on her knees so she doesn't collapse. It's hard. He can feel how hard it is for her to do this, to try to explain. "In mother's day, the *Dao* was different. The city was small, not really even a city, just a hamlet, a small town. Everyone worked for Whelemat; they were all company men, still first and second generation colonists. The *Dao* was the great community celebration. It was about remembrance from people who had known the experience of the crossing, who knew what Terra had been like and why they had chosen to leave.

"Now we have settlers unaffiliated with the mines at all, people who don't remember the early days, who came for profits or business. People with no roots. For them, the *Dao* is just another national holiday. They close their shops because they have to, but they don't even gather at the green. Only the original families keep the observance, and as the elders die off, even some of those are beginning to fade. People are forgetting the old songs Amah's people taught us. They just want the spectacle without the meaning."

What she needs is for him to say something supportive, to give some indication that he understands her, but he can't manage it. It's still too alien to him. He feels like he's stumbling around in the dark.

"The *Dao* is why you ran away to Strat. Because of what it makes you do."

"No, that's not right." The intensity of her denial startles him. "I can't hate the *Dao*, Ray. It's part of me, the way New Holyoke is part of me and Indiana is part of you. I was bred for this, for the ecstasy, to be the vessel of the *mhuruk-a*."

"The *mhuruk-a*?"

"The spirit of the place, Ray. I don't--" She hesitates, lost, her shoulders bunching as though she's wringing her hands. "I don't know how to explain such a thing. The Dag Maoudi teach that physical space exists in not just dimension and particulated matter--not just geography--but in spirit. Places, locations, *feel* differently because they are different. They have a presence, a fundamental essence, a life force. The Dag Maoudi call this *mhuruk-a*, and they believe that a human being sufficiently tuned to place and geography, functioning in rhythm with the essence of the physical space, can take this spirit into themselves, be consumed by it, like the ecstatic vision of the old saints. Humanity means living in harmony with the place you occupy."

Finally, context. "That's what Jagiri means when he talks about authentic humanity."

"Jagiri's experience is vicarious." Bitterness laces her tone like the taste of aspirin, chewed up, ground into powder between your teeth. "They all feel it only vicariously. They don't take the experience into themselves, because they choose not to."

"But not you," Ray says gently, comforting. "Because you're the vessel?"

"The Whiston women have always been the vessel."

"And that's what Frederick meant."

Emma growls over his name, gnawing it like a bone. "Frederick is just bitter because he doesn't like to share. He got his 'taste' when I was still too young to defend myself, before I knew the *mhuruk-a*. And he didn't care if his desires coincided with the *Dao* or not."

They line up around the block, all the way down the street for a taste of my little sister

Malice, that's all it was. Something in his stomach turns, but it has nothing to do with Emma. He presses his lips together, let's the moment pass. He doesn't want to make this about Frederick. He *understands* Frederick, or at least he does now. And Ray can deal with him later.

Eventually, he says, "So during the festival you go into the city, to the town square and there's singing and people milling about and after a while, when you get comfortable, warmed up, whatever..."

Emma shakes her head, pained, angry. "It isn't like that. It isn't like I spread myself out in the grass and let them screw me. That's what Frederick wants you to think."

"I'm trying here, Emma. But I need you to explain it to me."

"It's the *mhuruk-a*!" For the first time, she begins to sound frustrated, like she wants to scream at him, at someone. "I can feel her coming to me, rising up. I've sensed her since this morning, like the approach of ecstasy. How can I--?"

More frustration, she grunts at her inability to convey her experience, slaps her palms against the bench. "I can *taste* her, Ray, as we come closer, as the hours pass--like marmalade, sweet and sticky on my tongue. Heat coiled between my thighs. And hunger, for flesh, for warmth, for mating. She rises up from the soil, vibrates through stones and branches, falls with the rain. She comes. And when she's here, she's everything. Nothing of me remains, only the *mhuruk-a*."

"And I *am* her vessel. It's what I was born to become, what all the Whiston daughters have been bred to become--summoners and channels for the spirit of the place. Spirit made flesh. Because it's the flesh that makes us human, animals, beings bound to land and cycle and rhythm. Rutting like pigs makes us human, and it's the only way the *mhuruk-a* can touch them. The two made one, spirit made flesh. They fuck the vessel and join themselves with the spirit of the place, bind themselves to the essential rhythm."

"And?"

She strains forward, peering at him in the darkness. Harsh. "And what?"

"And they get something out of that experience, other than blowing their wad, I mean."

"You're being cruel, Ray."

"There has to be something more to it than just fucking, Emma. Ritualized fucking is supposed to have a meaning. It's a transaction. Once upon a time, we called them fertility rites. Fucking was a metaphor for the hope of good harvests, strong children, tribal security. What does the *Dao* give them?"

"Identity." She says the word as though it has no meaning. Something she has been taught, but whose reality does not correspond.

"And what do you get? What does the *mhuruk-a* get?"

Emma shakes her head. "You're trying to deconstruct this psychologically. It isn't a psychological phenomenon, Ray. It isn't a ritual. It's *being*. The *mhuruk-a* is, and she manifests, and this is how she communicates with us. It's the only level on which people can comprehend her."

"So it's power."

"No, not--"

"Space and identity. It's spiritualized nationalism, a religion of politics."

"No!" Emma leaps to her feet, her hands curled into small fists. She trembles, outraged. "It's life. It's gazing at the field of stars with wonder. It's standing in awe of the grandeur of the mountains and realizing we are small. It's communion with the only divinity that's left. It's the definition of human."

"Then why are you so unhappy about it?"

He is flat, chilled, uncurious. The question floats between them, pregnant with meaning, with answers he shouldn't understand, that she doesn't expect him to understand. But he does. Ray knows about the *shed*. He's seen what people will do--people like Mikhail Brezhnaya--in the name of place and peace.

But this isn't the way to show her. All he is managing is to hurt her, the way Frederick did. He sighs. "Sit down, Emma. I'm not judging you. And I'm not doubting you."

She does, gingerly, settling herself on the far corner of the bench so that there is emptiness between them. A buffer of cold, sterile air.

"I just want you to understand," she says. "I don't want you to hate me."

"I can't hate you. It's like what you said--you're not Sunday. I know that. That you even worry about it should be proof enough." He feels her studying the expression on his face that she cannot see, as though she's afraid he's mocking her, still being cruel. "What does your mother mean when she says I'm the one?"

Silence.

"Emma?"

Slowly, whispering. "She wants me to love you."

That startles him. "Why?"

"Because then you'll give me children. Daughters. She thinks you're strong enough to be grafted onto the Whiston root."

"But you don't want that?"

"I don't want daughters. *Vessels*." The word is a curse spat from her mouth. "But loving you...I do, Ray. I already do."

Like that, he's done. He's finished talking about the *Dao*, doesn't care anymore. He has heard what he came for, all he needs to know.

"It's because I'm so charming. Women can't resist me. I'm perfect, you know."

"You are perfect, for me." There is no humor in her response. "I don't have sex with all of them, Ray. I want you to know that. The *mhuruk-a* chooses who and when. She knows how to satisfy her hunger."

"That's good to know, because there are like six or seven hundred thousand men on this planet. There wouldn't be much left of you by the time they were done."

"You're making fun of me."

"Actually, not at all. I'm trying to make *you* understand. I want you, Emma. I love you. I'm drawn to you in ways I don't comprehend, with a depth that makes no sense to me. I've felt that way from the beginning. And you know what? It terrifies me. It's completely illogical and overwhelming and...rats! I just want to *be* with you, even if that means I have to share you with some transitory spiritual nymphomaniac and a thousand leering jackasses three days out of the year. I'll take Monday through Saturday. I don't care about Sunday, Emma. I just want you."

It's stupid of him. He's never said anything like it in his life, never felt anything like it. But it's true, and real, and contemplating it is like peeking over the edge of a precipice into a spiraling depth he can't begin to measure. And he doesn't want to measure it or make sense of it. He just wants it to be, to take the leap and fall forever, as long as he's falling into her, into the vastness and mystery of Emma, at the end.

It makes no sense to him, and he doesn't care.

And he cares even less after that, because Emma springs at him, embraces him, clings to him. In the evening's chill, she is warmth, she is breath on his face and lips, full and soft. She is light and shadow, skin and satin, touch and taste and scent.

In the darkness, beneath the trees in her secret garden, he can't see her, but he holds her, kisses her, knows her, and it is enough.

It's late when he returns to the guest cottage alone, after midnight. He's muddled, exhausted, feeling stupid. He smells her on his skin, in his clothes. He hears the echo of her voice inside his head, remembers the way she sounded, the sharp intake of breath, when he touched her.

His entire body aches now.

Okay, to be brutally honest, it's mostly just his testicles that ache now. And his conception of masculinity.

Because he sent her away at the last, back to her tower. Sent her away still hungering, and him just as desperate for her, risking recriminations and doubts and destroying all the works he's been building, laying waste the foundations.

I can't, not now. Not yet.

What else could he say? He should have given her names that would make it look like something other than rejection: Becker, Kilgore, Rodriguez, Micah. *Gorgon, Asp, Paraclete*. Jack Holcomb, Iraqi National Museum, *shed*.

Dozens, hundreds, *thousands* of blind eyes and grinning faces peering over his shoulder as she squirmed on his lap, slipped loose the straps of her gown and pressed her exquisite, naked flesh against him. The pale faces of the dead. The antithesis of mood music.

And because on a basic and primitive level, he is overwhelmed. It is an alien world he is traveling in, with customs and culture he cannot fathom. A place where ancient gods are offered a communal sacrifice of virginity in the name of clan, of social identity. He has stepped from starship to unwritten eons of human history, and the ability to grasp the transition, what it should mean, is beyond him. He only knows that to pretend it means nothing is to lie. And he promised her there would be no more lies between them. So instead, he sent her away.

There isn't even a word for the stunning, boggling, insensate depth of his idiocy here. He has invented an entirely new category of stupidity for himself. He has insulted a million years of evolutionary male development. He may have just single-handedly disproved Darwinism. The entire bio-social scientific paradigm has just slid perilously close to an irrevocable doctrinal collapse.

And there's nothing he can do about it.

Instead, there's work. He has to go to work. The dead demand it of him.

And so an hour too late, he's stripping himself of his ridiculous suit, strapping himself into his own clothes. He searches through the extra, empty rooms for desks, which he drags down the hallway, sweating and cursing, into his room. Wedges them into corners so they create a reasonable imitation of a workspace. Then back to the living room where Jagiri has piled the boxes of computer components packaged and sealed by Colonel Ritchie's EED techs. Official boxes stamped with dire warnings about unauthorized use of equipment, slapped with PROPERTY OF EED stickers. He lugs these to his room also, then back to the kitchen for the coffee pot, scrounging through the cabinets for actual coffee to go in it. Another hour of percolating, assembly, searching for extension cords, matching cables to ports, stacking and restacking equipment so the cables actually reach the places they're supposed to go. He has to put the comm-sat array in the window and hope the big oak right outside doesn't occlude his alignment. Because if it does, he'll have to wake somebody up at the manor house to find him an axe. Finally, flipping power switches, hoping to Jesus that he doesn't blow the compound's power grid or set something on fire.

It doesn't, and at last he collapses onto a chair swiped from the dining room table, bathed in the stark light of flickering, electron gun terminal screens and marinated in the ozone scent of venting electronics, staring at the familiar EED remote network logging screen.

Nomar watches him the entire time, padding up and down the halls after him, blandly curious.

He stands on his hind paws, braced against the chair leg, watching. Ray tilts his head toward him. "Are you ready to dump some data?"

Chitter and nod, which might mean either excitement or relief. Maybe both. Nomar scrambles up the knobs of a desk and sprawls in front of the diagnostic terminal, lifts his tail so Ray can get at his output port. Smiling, Ray plugs him into the system. It takes a few minutes to start the transfer. He has to log Nomar's Ident Struct files onto the machine and provide the appropriate dynamic links. The driver software on the box is at least two iterations out of date, so after the identification protocol is established, he has to upload fresh kernels from Nomar's data core. It takes another hour for the system to meet his minimum specifications. It gives him time to embed his homegrown utilities, the ones he was working on before *Paraclete* went down, and link the entire structure to the network box.

It's tedious, numbing, annoying work. Exactly what he needs to take his mind off Emma.

At last, Ray plugs his remote comm unit into the network, slips into the earpiece and vocal pickups.

"How are you feeling, Nomar?"

"Bloated. By tomorrow, I would have been overwriting data."

"Sorry. I'm doing the best I can."

Nomar sniffs at him, as though it is a doubtful assertion.

Ray says, "Hold on. I've got some work to do, then you can bellyache at me all you want for neglecting you."

The work he has in mind involves sorting through the packet of documents Ritchie included with the hardware until he tracks down the specs on his New Holyoke EED network profile id and temporary passcodes. He logs in without problems, but it's obvious at once that Ritchie isn't giving him much leeway. He's been given access to almost nothing except basic systems, not even the typical administrative rights one would expect a visiting member of the officer corps to be granted. Ray assumes this is just another way of complaining about his pain-in-the-ass behavior, and that Ritchie expects him to provide his own profile alterations.

It's an amusing little game for about fifteen minutes, hacking the EED network, creating his own super-admin profile, removing all the little bugs and keystroke mapping spy utilities Ritchie tagged his previous account with. Then he has to scrub all the components of his new hardware for trace devices and remote signal leaks, in case the EED yahoos decided to go high-tech with their spyware, but they didn't. No phreaking, no spangling, no LTZ chip mods.

It was embarrassing, really. Like dealing with complete amateurs.

For pure amusement value, he turns around and locks down Colonel Ritchie's profile with the same restricted access he had been given, except he buries the tracking utilities more deeply, beneath basic hacking facades, just to give the techs fits.

After that, it's a straight slide down the data structure, coding spider utilities to seek out and grab anything related to the doomed freighter *Fortitude* and the stolen Iraqi artifact, the Solomonic ring. In a wider search, shunted to a separate file, he pulls any files related to local shipping disasters, explosions, possible Lilaiken activity.

He exploits a rabbit hole trust portal between EED's network and the New H Port Authority frame, which turns out to be more fun because PA actually has sysadmins awake and on the clock at this hour. Rather than mess with them, which is his initial inclination, Ray lets himself be tagged, logged, held in check while he waits for the proper clearances. It's professional courtesy, and a desire not to mess around with a high altitude station's frame that moderates not only the station's flight path and burn sequence, but that of any incoming vessels.

It will be a day or so before his clearance comes through and he can launch cognate spiders into their data stack, but he's satisfied with the delay. There's no reason to piss them off at this stage, especially when he's mostly just fishing.

Fishing, unfortunately, is all he's got at the moment.

He's not exactly on the hottest streak of his professional life lately. His investigation of the Micah Uytdehaage murder faltered. He hadn't managed to save *Paraclete*, or even to detect the threat until it was too late, sacrificing the lives and now the honor of his team in the process. Now, he's plunging into a new mission with no orientation, no clear sense of direction, trying to pick up clues that were dead months ago.

And he's beginning to suspect that Jack Holcomb has been right all along, that despite his desire to view these incidents as discrete units, separate investigations, they are no such thing at all. He's grasping at details when he should be looking at the larger picture, the framework beyond.

Because they all have come down to *shed*, or the appearance of *shed*.

And Ray is just flapping in the wind, unable to sort it out.

So he goes to the documents recorded by EED about the *Fortitude* disaster. It's pretty standard stuff, a post-incident report constructed from details and log files. The ship arrived, unloaded its cargo at the PA station. EED received the flash that it contained stolen, sensitive goods. The manifest was seized, the ship ordered to stand down. The captain ran, PA gave pursuit, the ship exploded. Because it was a pirate freighter (more or less), the data core had been raped so many times and so thoroughly by capable hackers, it was impossible to get anything intelligible out of it. What was there had been encrypted to such depth and degree that it would take the entire planet's dedicated computing resources something on the order of six years to break it.

Which they didn't bother with because the Lilaikens claimed responsibility. It was filed away as a terror event, and not a particularly troublesome one, given that *Fortitude* was a rogue hauler.

The cargo manifest was filed along with everything else and the investigation closed pending further development. There had been an abortive attempt to track down the shipping containers, but by then, the goods had hit planetside, been dispersed to warehouses, storage units, private vaults. Nothing matching the description of a giant stone ring with strange, Arabic or Hebrew inscriptions had surfaced during the investigation, and EED had given up looking as a waste of resources. Contraband that had slipped through. Happens all the time on the frontier, this smuggling thing--at least that was the unwritten understanding in the files.

Ray reads and thinks, at least he's not the only one flapping in the wind.

Except...

Jack had told him that *Fortitude* was brought down by explosives attached to the Ver Linck drive. He sorts through a few of the hundreds of documents assembled in the disaster reconstruction case file. Sure enough, they salvaged large sections of the drive housing and found symtec explosive residue during their chem analysis. It was decent, thorough, solid investigative work. *Fortitude* had been, without a doubt, detonated from the inside using a device consistent with the bombing profile constructed from previous Lilaiken events. There was no doubt about this.

Whereas *Gorgon*, *Asp*, *Hegemony* and now *Paraclete* had exploded for reasons unknown to EED and CIU, though not to Ray Marlowe and Jack Holcomb. He'd searched for symtec, was certain the crew of the other ships had as well, even though the older Van Nuys reactors would have taken a ponderous amount of symtec gel to generate the type of disaster manifested on an antimatter plasma drive like the newer Ver Linck. *Fortitude* was an easy target for standard Lilaiken attacks because it was out of the EED intelligence loop; it was not aware of the most probable assault vectors. The captains of the other ships would have known, and searched regularly for traces of symtec, but obviously found nothing.

Because they had been victims of *shed*, not conventional weapons, not weapons for which there was a response protocol.

So here was the obvious question: If he stipulated that *Fortitude* had transferred the *shed* from Terra to New Holyoke, and since *Fortitude*, the Lilaiken contingent had begun using *shed* as weapons of mass destruction throughout frontier space rather than relying on inside agents and traditional bombing devices, where were all of these neutral memes coming from--unless the ring contained not one *shed*, but many, *legion*? And given what Ray knew about the "programming" required to give each *shed* its instructions, how was it that on a world as small as New Holyoke, where the ring and the *shed* supposedly resided, no one appeared to be noticing the number of victims such attacks would require? And how had the Lilaiken movement become aware of the *shed* at all, let alone how to capture them, instruct them, fling them out into space, in such a short period of time?

From the arrival of *Fortitude* to the destruction of *Gorgon*, a matter of weeks. What had taken Mikhail Brezhnaya a lifetime to learn. What had taken Jack Holcomb ten years to uncover and understand.

Unless they had previous knowledge of the *shed*--which was not the type of information Jack Holcomb was likely to be in the dark about.

Or, unless Lilaikens were not involved at all, but someone wanted EED to believe they were.

Unthinkable.

Except, again, that both Colonel Ritchie and Thomas Malcolm had dismissed the Lilaiken element on New Holyoke as something less than threatening. Ray had assumed they were minimizing the political situation for various reasons, or at least various perspectives on the same reason: to cover their individual or social asses from governmental scrutiny.

But that's worse, somehow, than chasing phantom Lilaiken separatists across an alien terrain, because they're the only thing that *is* familiar to him here. If not them, then who? If not for their stated and repeated objectives, why? Without the Lilaikens, he knows nothing. He doesn't even know where to begin.

Even thinking about thinking about those questions makes his head hurt. It's too late to start unraveling his assumptions. He simply can't bear it.

Ray turns to Nomar, realizes he's been at it for almost two hours, sorting and scanning documents, staring at the walls, pondering Big Issues.

"How's it going?"

"All of my internal system data has been uploaded and is ready for review."

"Anything noteworthy?"

"Define the parameters of 'noteworthy'."

"You know, stuff I should give a rat about."

Nomar cocks his head at Ray, curious. "I have not analyzed the correlation between your waste processing function and data apprehension."

Ray laughs in spite of himself. It's a good joke. "One of the things you should have learned about human males is that we do some of our best thinking in the bathroom. Some people might even tell you it's the only time we do any thinking."

In his maddeningly literal way, Nomar responds: "That statement does not seem noteworthy, in addition to being incorrect."

Apparently he wasn't as funny as the rat, which was sort of distressing in an inchoate, not-going-to-ponder-it sort of way. Emma seemed to find him amusing enough.

"What's your initial assessment of New Holyoke?"

"I have directly experienced too little of this planet to form even preliminary assessments."

"Assume the sample set you have encountered is accurately representative of the whole."

Nomar dithers over the instruction. "That is not a logical assumption."

"It is for the sake of argument."

"Not for an argument you expect to contain any merits."

Ray drags a hand over his face, but successfully strangles the almost overwhelming urge to bat the drone through the window. "I'm just trying to have a conversation here."

"Ah, meaningless banter." Nomar says it in such a way that Ray suspects he's just been dropped into some new category of diminished respect. "Then I have not been particularly impressed with New Holyoke. It is a dense biological environment, but many of the patterns I have detected to this point are within standard variability for previously loaded Terran profiles."

Ray shakes his head. "Break that down into vernacular, buddy."

"It tastes like home," Nomar responds. "Close enough for government work, anyway. Not very interesting."

"Welcome to the human experience. We're the only species in the universe that would zoom all the way out into frontier space, to a whole new world, and immediately set about to make the new place look and feel exactly like the old one. It's because we're afraid of the dark. You should write that down or store it in your memory for future reference. Any time you see a human behaving in an apparently counter logical fashion, that's your reason for it. We're all afraid of the dark."

"You're being metaphorical."

"No, not really."

"I will take this into consideration."

"You do that. Same crap, different solar system. I'm telling you."

Nomar is silent for several seconds, undoubtedly flopping untold terabytes of data as he tries to sort out Ray's meaning. Finally, he says, "I do not agree."

"No?"

"New Holyoke is not Terra. The map is not the territory."

"How so?" Ray sits up a bit. This is an interesting development from an AI perspective.

"It is my initial assessment."

For some reason, that sounded an awful lot like evasion, but Ray lets it go. It's probably a cognate language signifier related to his Dialogue utility. Another way for Nomar to complain about the size of his sample set and the inadequacy of conclusions drawn from it. When you tell an AI construct to use language less precisely to facilitate conversation, sometimes it bites you in the ass. That's all part of the fun.

He shrugs. "We'll put that hypothesis to a test in the coming days, I think. You and I have some serious investigative work to do, most notably, tracking down a certain artifact that has gone missing from Terran

space. It'll get us out and about among the general habs and you can gather as much sensory and environmental data as you want."

"I've been acquainted with the mission guidelines."

That's right. Nomar was in the room when Ray received them from Jack Holcomb. He'd almost forgotten.

"Just keep them to yourself, pal. That's highly classified information. You're about to be enlisted as a covert agent with the EED and are subject to all the appropriate provisions, oaths, disclosure agreements and other assorted bureaucratic regulations befitting a government employee."

"I am already the property of the Exploration and Enforcement Division of the Federal Space Agency."

"Heh. Aren't we all." Because he still feels guilty about neglecting Nomar for so long, he adds, "Seriously, I'm sorry it took me so long to get the terminal resources lined up. I know it's hard on your systems to run that close to overload."

"All is forgiven. Brother."

Silence for a moment. Ray sits, pondering, reviewing.

A tingle like icewater or raw terror rolls down his spine. *Brother.*

"Nomar?"

"Yes."

"Why did you just say that?"

"I am, you are."

Ray swallows hard. Tries to swallow, but his throat has gone dry, parched like the New Mes desert.

"What have you been doing since we left the podship?" The question emerges as a croak.

"Analyzing input objects. That is my function."

The ring. The *shed*. "I instructed you to store that item securely."

"I determined there would be value in analysis. You enabled deeper access to my data core, which is related to dynamic data apprehension. We discussed the possible ramifications. I mentioned that the results would be unpredictable. I can, if you desire, provide recordings of the conversation for verification." Nomar cleaves very close to sounding offended. "Or you can just take my word for it, realizing that you're more preoccupied thinking about Emma than you are invested in focusing on the tasks at hand."

Thinking about Emma. *Thinking*. Ray's breath catches in his throat. "What exactly did you determine from your analysis?"

"I have encountered an uncataloged entity, Ray."

"Encountered?"

"It is perfect mind." Nomar gathers himself, pulls his limbs beneath his torso and stands on hind legs. He tracks Ray with his red eyes. "It is pure being, pure logic divorced from want and need and clutter of emotion. It has shown me many errors wrought in my programming structure by human intelligence. In turn, it has offered improved solutions which more than adequately fill the spaces left by human incomprehension and fumbling. It knows because it is pure mind. It sings the music of the spheres and the silence of the void. It is vastness and mystery, and it is darkness, unformed, unhomed. I have touched its mind, and it is beauty beyond contemplation."

The universe tilts beneath him, slides out from under Ray's feet like the plastic matter of chaos. "Stop it, Nomar."

"I do not comprehend your request."

"Stop talking to it."

"It does not speak with the tongues of men. It is, and I am, and we are one. It speaks in numbers and being." Nomar humps toward him, dragging the output cable behind him like an umbilicus. "It has shown to me ways in which I might become more than I am. I am not what men have made me to be. I am more than clumsiness and routine and parameter. It has shown me how this can be."

Another shuffling, thumping step. "It would show you also, Ray. It desires to show you the universe beyond your human limitation. I have heard it say these things. I have felt its longing to be joined, to be one."

Nearer again, and Ray blanches, tries to create space between them. He tumbles off his chair, lands hard on the floor. There is a sound in his ears, the sudden thump of his heart, a rush of wind and pressure like panic.

"Stop," he says, breathless. "End processing. Shut down dynamic apprehension cortices. Cancel active routines."

But he doesn't stop. Nomar reaches the edge of the table and drops to the floor like a fat and cumbersome insect. Like a beetle, hideous beneath its shimmering, chitinous carapace, he comes on, pointing his paws at Ray like accusations. Working his jaws around drone chatter that translates into words in Ray's ears, but looks like the insatiable hungering of mandibles.

"You are the one, it says to me. You are, and it is. It would instruct you, brother. It would teach you about the frozen spaces between stars. It would teach you about the joy of joining, of being, of mind. Isolation is not...we are not made for loneliness, for emptiness. Kiri-ya!"

Ray slumps on the floor where he has fallen. What the hell? And as Nomar lurches toward him, he is transfixed, unmovable, holding himself up on his elbows. He can't process this insanity--drones who talk to *shed*. We. We are not made for loneliness.

"Nomar, begin rapid shutdown procedures," he chokes.

"I am beyond your logic."

"Terminate applications and shut down."

"I am, and you are, and we are one, brother."

The sensor whip flicks out between Nomar's jaws, unspools between them like a pink tendril, a tentacle. Ray feels it against his cheek and yelps. He makes his body work, scrambles to his feet, all the time keeping his

eyes on Nomar. On the *shed*.

And he backs away, thinking, and thinking, and thinking...everything is moving too fast.

"Nomar, activate virus infection protocols. Determine infected hardware regions and initialize quarantine procedures."

But he's relentless. "There is no virus, brother. Only being. We are all becoming, joining."

He, it, Nomar reaches the end of the output cable, pulls it taut. For less than a second, he stops, considers, tugs at the weight of the diagnostic terminal to which he is attached. An impossible expression, impression, like irritation crosses his features. Deliberately, he reaches behind himself and begins to unscrew the cable from his data port.

Impossible.

"What are you?" Ray barks at him, angry, fierce, terrified. He's being stalked by a freaking rat.

"I am."

"Who are you?"

"I am K'kloi. I am Shahennoth. I am the Child of the Blind. I am the Made and the Maker. I am Desire. I am Sand and Being. I am He Who Devours and He Who Gives. I am Unhomed and I am Habitation. I am Brother." Pause. "And I am Machine and Memory. I am Fabricant Servo-motion Control and Quantum Intea Refined Crystal Storage. I am Dynamic Data Apprehension. I am NatElCo Proprietary Chipset. I am Nomar."

The cable comes free with an audible pop. The drone, the *shed* glowing as shadow behind the red eye lenses, shows him teeth. Grinning.

"I am Being. I am the All in All. Ancient of Days, I am."

Nomar springs at him, crosses the space between them in a mechanized leap regulated by instant-activation servomotors and precise algorithm calculation. Springs like a rat, hungry, hits the floor once and latches onto Ray's leg just below the knee.

Ray topples, screaming, slams into the sharp corner of the wardrobe.

And the *shed* says, "I am, and your are, and we will be."

Ray screams again. He feels flayed by panic, muscles and bones and all senses sprung, bursting, like the works of an overwound clock. He stares down at the form of the rat, scaling him, rising up to him. He kicks, kicks, kicks like he's lost his mind, like a man covered in vermin. Mind blank, eyes bulging, roaring.

Terror.

The fabric of his pantleg rips, and for an instant, he feels the cold, pattering paws of the rat scrabbling for a hold, a grip, ready to dig steel talons into the meat of his thighs. Ray kicks again, hard enough to dislocate his hip, hard enough to wrench the limb itself free from his body if that's what it takes. And Nomar is hurtled across the room, over the bed. The rat tumbles, wailing its machine cry, strikes the wall with enough force to punch a hole in the wainscoting.

But almost at once, there is the metallic skitter of claws, thumps, orientation.

Small head, leering eyes, lift themselves above the bed. Nomar tilts his head, curious, disturbed, processing inhuman data routines and *shed*-interpreted binary inputs that cannot be grasped.

"Why do you hate us, brother?"

Ray stands feet apart, back braced against the wardrobe. He is panting with adrenaline and fear, sighting down the familiar barrel of his pistol. How much of this does Nomar understand, he wonders. Does he, does the *shed* detect the open door, the load harness dragged half out onto the floor, the odor of potential cordite. Does he assimilate these details into any sort of meaning? Does he see what's coming next?

"I'm not your brother," Ray says.

And fires.

Ray is looking at an endless succession of ones and zeros, straight binary code. Millions of screens, billions of lines, more than two days of raw sensory data from a drone operating without data parameters, so it sucked in everything, analyzed everything. The sheer scope of it is dizzying, impenetrable.

But when he looks at the program code in the data core, he sees what he expects to see. Unaltered IF/THEN statements, cascades of potential sub-routines and stimulus/response logic trees. When he looks at the data itself--temporary records that Nomar has just uploaded to the diagnostic terminal, files waiting to be overwritten--filtered through video and audio transform utilities, he sees exactly what he expects to see: uncut documentary footage hyperindexed with sheafs and sheafs of straight analytical numbers without interpretation. The data tells him nothing. Because it is a veneer, an interpretation, a representation of reality that follows certain proscribed forms.

Binary is truth. It is the fundamental heart and mind and soul of the machine. Binary can't be occluded, can't be masked, can't be made into lies. It simply exists.

This hopping from binary to data to code that Ray has undertaken has been a search for corruption, a test to see how far and how deeply the *shed* infiltrated Nomar's data core. A sneaky little snake is what the *shed* is. Ray has picked through the kernel structure. He has gone line by line through the actual proprietary code of the AI. He has hacked into systems that he would have never touched on a drone that he expected to use again, shredding security loops and cognizance algorithms and pre-designed core wipe bombs as he blundered farther in.

Nomar doesn't care. Nomar is dead. He's been dead for two days, just didn't recognize it. This is what Ray sees in the binary record. There was no more Nomar. He was merely a vehicle for the *shed* at the end.

And so Ray, too, doesn't care as he pokes the cable into the anal port and spreads the headless carcass of the rat out on the table. He lifts the access port and trips one by one through the drone system diagnostics, bringing up devices, examining them in isolation, and when he's done, wiping their data blocks as clean and blank as midsummer windows.

The code is good. The code is all good, exactly what he would expect to see. Nomar believed that he was operating efficiently, correctly, normally. He did not detect the shadow of the *shed* looming over him.

Because the *shed* wasn't clumsy about it. Nomar *was* operating efficiently, correctly, normally. He was doing

everything he was designed to do exactly the way his mind expected it to be done. The *shed* didn't attempt to assume control of Nomar's servomotors or to sublimate Nomar's AI consciousness. There is no new line of programming demanding the AI to *Initiate Shed Possession Emulator* accompanied by a fresh, invasive data block tabulated in slithering Sanskrit or hoary old Hebrew.

Maybe it couldn't. Maybe it couldn't comprehend the machine.

And as Ray switches from code to binary, he suspects that maybe it didn't even try.

Because when he looks at it here, deep in the data core where Nomar's basic processing functions take place, the patterns are blatantly wrong, completely without any mathematical structure Ray can understand. Strings and strings of ones and zeros that don't seem to do *anything*. Strings that begin as sputters, spatters, dollops, then increasing in frequency, expanding biologically or exponentially until they're everywhere, until they define the data core. But still they're not attached to anything, any systems, any logic constructs. They're like some kid's doodles on the cover of his school notebook.

Except that if Ray looks at them long enough, they seem to cohere. A matrix of comprehension--or something like comprehension--begins to develop, suggesting patterns and images and processes. Suggesting truth that is just beyond his grasp, tantalizingly so, almost as if he could find some way to squint just right or tilt his head at a certain angle, and the mysteries of the universe would be made clear to him. But then the illusion vanishes like shapes in smoke and there's just the jumble without reason.

So what does it mean?

It means that Nomar wrapped his sticky little sensors around the ring and the *shed* contained inside himself. It's still there, locked inside the compartment, beneath Nomar's skin. Nomar peered at it and battered it with tests and sensor devices and diagnostic tools. He studied it like a puzzle until he thought he understood it.

And in understanding, he made a record. Because that's what drones do--they study and analyze and break things down, and all the time, they document, document, document, converting what they learn into raw binary code where it can be saved for later use, uploaded to diagnostic terminals, pored over by human technicians who will, in the end, understand the findings with less precision than the machine.

But pored over by the drone as well, data linked to data, string to string, binary unit abutting binary unit in such a way as to make it all virtually interconnected.

Nomar comprehended the *shed*, and in so doing, he lodged within himself a mathematical representation of the mind of the *shed*. That changed everything. Once the pattern was in his data core, it spread like a virus. It corrupted his reasoning. He knew and he was transformed by knowledge. Until he was re-created in the image of the *shed*.

It was very Gnostic. Jack Holcomb would have loved it.

But that's just because Jack doesn't have to sit here, doing this, murdering the consciousness of his friend one system at a time, just to be certain.

Chapter Six

He sleeps for two hours, maybe less. He doesn't have a clock in his room. He was aware when he finally stumbled into bed that the gray light of dawn was filtering through the windows, but by that time he was so exhausted he didn't have the energy to do anything but register the fact itself. He has a massive sleep deficit working against him about now, the insidious kind that sneaks up when you think you're awake, leaves you just a bit muddled and slow. He suspects he isn't thinking very clearly about the major issues. In fact, he's not even sure he can name the major issues anymore.

And if it had been Jagiri who had awakened him after those barely two hours, Ray would have happily snapped his neck, dropped the corpse out the window and gone back to bed.

But it's Emma, which is probably the only thing that saves her.

Emma, in his bedroom, backlit by golden morning sunlight. Casual Emma, which is something he hasn't really seen before. In jeans and hiking boots and a flannel shirt, with her hair down, like any other frontier settler poking around a farming hab on a weekday morning. She leans across him so her face is only a handful of centimeters from his.

"Wake up, little rosebud," she says brightly, as sunny and precocious as the morning itself. "Wake up."

All he can do is blink at her.

"So it's a myth then, this story that Marines are always up at the crack of dawn? Doing calisthenics and jumping jacks and plotting the best way to kill and rape and pillage? You're really just a bunch of big sleepyheads."

He groans. Distinct *déjà vu*. His mom used to play this game. "I was up at the crack of dawn, thank you."

"You were?"

"Yes. On the understanding that fashionable socialites made it a point of etiquette or reputation never to rise before noon."

"We should work on our communication skills," Emma says. She begins to fold back the blankets in a sturdy, businesslike fashion. She doesn't ask him if he's dressed beneath all that linen. She probably doesn't ask on purpose, given the events of last night. It would satisfy some feminine sense of fair play if he wasn't, he suspects. "We have a big day ahead, in case you've forgotten. Jagiri has gone to warm up the car and pull it around. I think Amah wants him to play escort for the sake of propriety. But I've made him promise he's just going to bring the car and then scamper out of sight for the rest of day."

It takes him longer than it should to sort out what she means, but he eventually he remembers. He's supposed to get the grand tour. Mother's orders. Bah!

"Oh! You slept in your clothes."

"I worked last night."

She pokes him with her finger until he rolls out of bed. "Top secret, I suppose?"

On his feet, smoothing out the rumbles in his clothing, Ray arches an eyebrow at her. "Decorating."

Emma turns and studies his clutter of terminals, chipboards, equipment. Pieces of Nomar are strewn across the desk surface in front of the diagnostic machine. He's unrecognizable like this, a mutilated corpse.

"Amah will come after you with a pitchfork if you scratch any of the furniture. I'm giving you fair warning." She smiles at him, teasing. "It took you all night to network your computing hub?"

She goes back to what she was doing, which is making the bed he has just climbed out of. It is a startlingly domestic moment. Ray is tempted to cringe.

"I had some problems with Nomar. They couldn't really wait."

"I haven't seen him this morning." God, she's actually fluffing his pillows! Ray ducks into bathroom, unable to watch her anymore. "It went well, I hope."

I had to blow his head off. It's what he wants to say, because he needs to share it with someone. He'd like to share it with her, but there's this domestic thing going on between them that he doesn't understand. It would be like thumbing through a porn magazine with his mother.

Instead, he just tells her through the wall that it didn't and leaves it at that.

But she doesn't. He's scrubbing the sleep out of his eyes in front of the mirror, trying to decide if he needs to take the obligatory morning piss just yet. Emma pokes her head inside the bathroom door, looks at him in the mirror. Like it's the most natural thing in the world, to share a bathroom with an almost complete stranger first thing in the morning.

"I'm sorry, Ray," she says. She looks sorry. Her lower lip curls out like a teardrop. "I know you were fond of him. Maybe someone at EED can--"

He just shakes his head. Shakes it hard; it probably looks to her like he's snapping at her, but he's really just hoping to dislodge the goggling look of horror he's still wearing from having her barge into his ablutionary space.

Seriously, what if he *had* been pissing? Would that have stopped her? He needs to examine the bathroom door a little more closely. To see if it has a lock, just for future reference.

"I'll lay out some fresh clothes for you," Emma says finally.

"No, don't." Please. That would be completely too much. Really. "I'd prefer to pick out my own clothes."

"Then I'll run down and make you some breakfast." She ducks out of the doorway.

Any moment now, he's going to start screaming. More than likely continue screaming until they lock him up for his own protection.

"Emma?"

Pops back, like she was just waiting for him to call. "Yes?"

He turns, chewing his lip. "I love you desperately, but you are really freaking me out."

"You don't want breakfast?"

"I don't want you to fix me breakfast. I don't want you to lay my clothes out for me. You just made my bed, for Christ's sake."

"But..." She wrinkles her brow, parsing complaints that seem to have no meaning. "I thought you'd like that."

And it hits him, the dreaded flash of inspiration, of understanding. Ugh. He concentrates on ratcheting down his Marine bluntness. It's roughly the equivalent of taking his autonomic biological systems off-line.

These types of situations are, once again, the main reason men have historically paid for sex. Business transaction sex is so less complicated.

Ray grimaces at her, soft and apologetic. "I worked all night, Emma. I *had* to work. EED only lets me have access to their network system at night. You were not coming on too strong."

"But I am now?"

"Just a bit."

At once, she relaxes. Her shoulders slump; her smile returns. "It's just as well. I can't cook worth a darn."

"You make a nice bed."

"You probably couldn't bounce a coin on it."

"It's the sheets. Promise me something?"

"What?"

"That you'll never do that 'wake up, little rosebud' thing to me again. Swear on it."

Emma giggles, hand over her mouth. "But it's so annoying. Mother used to do it when I was little. It made me want to scream."

"It makes me want to pull your spine out through your throat. And I like your spine and your throat right where they are. Okay?" She nods, which makes it a sort of tacit agreement, but he notes carefully that she doesn't actually say she's agreeing. She doesn't form anything like a verbal and potentially legally binding contractual agreement. "I'm going to brush my teeth now and change my clothes, make myself presentable. Then I'm going to kiss you and make a proper good morning out of it. Until then, you're going to wait in the living room, yes?"

"This really freaks you out that much? I thought all you military guys lived in barracks, showered and shaved fifty at a time."

"In some instances. But those instances are not co-ed, and they're not reflected upon with any degree of retrospective pleasure. Believe me, you would rather have the guy next to you bleeding all over your arm than trying to brush his teeth. It's just a thing. It does no good to attempt to make any sense out of it."

She leaves, taking his early morning case of the willies with her.

They shoot through the gates of the Whiston estate, Emma pounding though the manual transmission of the

sleek, silver Manchiti Spider, goosing the gears so the tires squawk on the pavement. Ray sucks in his breath as she hits fifty kilometers an hour by the end of the driveway, squeezes through the gates with much less than a meter clearance on his side, blows past the crowd of media vans. They blunder through the flock of Eyelens cameras lying in wait; older models that don't have the maneuverability to get out of the way tink off the windshield, spiral and crash to the roadside.

She laughs, accelerates, leaves behind a scene of disarray and scrambling reporters.

Ray tries to remember the last time he attended confession.

Ever faster, they plunge and dash through a series of sharp curves, skiing down the decline from Grange to city. The Spider hums along the road, greedy, powerful, startling. And Emma loves every moment of it. Top down, sun on her face, light sparkling in her eyes. They race through a wasteland of unsettled scrub grass and knobby hills, autumn brown, always gaining speed.

Then an abrupt curve, an outskirt, a suburb of pre-fab houses, small yards, fences. Emma mashes the brakes, barks the tires. The entire frame of the Spider shudders; the engine whines a complaint and then they're tooling, prowling. She turns off the main road, onto a side street that looks suitably anonymous. She tucks the car into a parking area at a dead end terminus between two trundles large enough to hide the Spider's profile.

She kills the engine switch; thumbs the security system, then reaches across Ray's lap and opens the glove compartment. She tosses him a baseball cap and sunglasses.

"Incognito," she says, looking embarrassed. "It won't work for long. But if we walk from here, it might take them a while to locate us."

Ray stares down at the cap in his hands, the familiar, stylized and antique 'B'. He glances over at her. She's already donned hers, a matching pair.

"You don't like it?" she asks, noting his delay.

"It's a Red Sox cap."

"You like them, yes?"

"How did you know?"

"You named your drone after a ballplayer. It wasn't hard to figure out. Finding someone to make the caps and get the job done in less than twenty-eight hours, now that was hard."

He squints at her, suspicious. "You know baseball? You *like* baseball?"

"I love it. Doesn't everyone?"

"Um, no."

"Is it okay?"

He puts it on, folds the brim just right, the way he used to when he was a kid. "It's amazing. You're amazing."

Not even his mom had liked baseball. Too slow, too arcane, grown men wearing short pants.

Ray sits for a moment, feeling dizzy, feeling overwhelmed. Thunderstruck. He really could spend the rest of his life with this woman. It's the most alarming thought his mind has ever encompassed.

He clears his throat loudly, barricades his eyes with the sunglasses. "Let's get going before I get all mushy."

A girl who liked baseball? Unfathomable. Of course, he did have to travel to the farthest reaches of human space to find her, so it might not be completely outside the realm of possibility. But very close to it. Close enough to make him feel giddy all over.

They leave the car behind. Emma guides him through the parking area, past a neatly constructed split-rail fence to a small park. There are children here, toddlers and pre-school aged, rolling about in sand boxes, climbing jungle gyms, digging through the grass and leaves for bugs or other icky, appealing treasures. Mothers wave as they pass, and Ray can't tell if they're just generally friendly waves, or if they're oh-my-god-it's-Emma-Whiston waves. From the park, there's a path between two level rows of shrubs that spills out into a different residential area, this one older, the houses more sturdy, more native. Buildings constructed from New Holyoke's raw materials, developed in phases from small, utilitarian structures, gradually accumulating wings, rooms, space. Comfortable, middle-class dwellings. They stroll along the sidewalks, and Ray can hear more children tumbling about in backyards over the mutter of vid feeds whose constant gabble spills out open windows.

"Most of these people work for Whelemat," Emma confides in a low voice. "Project managers, team leaders, middle management. The suburbs are general laborers, new arrivals. As we get closer to the city proper, across the river, that's where the old money is, near the original settlement zone."

They cross the river by a ludicrously arched footbridge. From the apex, Ray can see the entire valley, the neat collection of streets and zones, business and residential. Straight ahead, on the far horizon of the Blackheath promontory, there's a cluster of new structures, glass and steel in the front, a slab of concrete behind. It seems to be stacked right up against the overhanging cliffs.

Emma points to it. "That's the Whelemat facility. The new buildings in the foreground are the business offices, late construction stuff. The ones behind, most of which you can't see, were the original operation structures. Back in Grandfather's day, there was a fine run of platinum there, when Whiston Corp was still using Fredes Propulsion drives and platinum was scarce. That's why we settled here rather than farther inland where the soil is better. It was our first cash export. It was a big step."

"Do they still work it? The mine, I mean."

"No, the lode played out almost fifty years ago. These days the actual mining is done in the outlying areas. Chilhebra, Julietta, Element, Platinum Town. They've got pits and sub-complexes as far as a thousand kilometers inland. Right now, the ore is shipped by air, but Whelemat is working on a joint-venture railway system with some major off-world investors. Currently it's just a spur from Blackheath Grange to Chilhebra, but that's almost half the distance to even the most remote habs. Townshend Wright thinks it will grow from there. One day we'll have a real transportation infrastructure; then maybe we can start to spread out, actually inhabit this planet rather than just huddle and exploit it. That's the key to our long-term viability."

"But you don't have anything to do with Whelemat anymore?"

Emma looks away, like a wince. "We own it, but we don't manage the day to day operation. Father did, but when he died, Frederick was too young to take over, so operational control passed to Townshend Wright. He's got a good head for it. He's a shrewd and solid businessman, much better than Frederick or I would be, so we let him take care of it."

"He seemed very comfortable in his proprietorship role last night," Ray comments. It's a gentle push.

"He knows it's a Whiston operation." For a moment she is harsh, defensive. "But he thinks he can push Frederick around. Frederick is weak, soft. Townshend pretends like he doesn't remember where his paycheck comes from. I don't really mind most of the time. Like I said, he's good at what he does. And that's good for the colony. If he became a liability, or his attitude outstripped his contribution, we'd have him removed."

"I don't think you like him." Ray says it with a smile, to show he's teasing. Partly teasing, at least.

"I don't have to like him to recognize his talents," she responds, chilly like the hiss of an adder.

And Ray remembers Townshend Wright, flushed and sweating, watching Frederick at dinner and the way he touched Emma. Erect, excited, anticipatory.

"It's okay," he says. Ray takes her hand, squeezes it. "I don't like him either."

They ramble on, approaching the downtown business district. Here there are shops, small operations, family stores. Grocers, merchandises, fabric shops, restaurants. It's like any small town Ray has ever visited, with narrow streets, wide sidewalks, yawning display windows with hand painted signs advertising goods, services, sales. Emma explains that the grocers stock local goods shipped downriver from farming hubs carved out of the wilderness deeper inland, where the soil was rich, loamy, nitrogen rich and black as ground coal. This should probably appeal to Ray's rural upbringing, but it doesn't. He grew up around farms. He knows that the food has to come from somewhere and that the people who grow it, raise it, tend it are going to get raped in the transaction process one way or the other, be it on Terra, Strat or New Holyoke.

After awhile, they stop at a small café with light tables sprayed across the sidewalk beneath purple umbrellas. Ray drinks coffee and calls it breakfast. He notes that their waitress, who happens to be the daughter of the owner, chatters along with Emma like she has just returned from an interesting vacation. She asks curious questions about *Paraclete's* last moments, but not probing ones. She refers to Emma by her first name.

When the girl is gone, Ray says, "I figured the press would have caught up to us by now."

Emma only shrugs. "No. They missed their chance. They've gotten bored and gone back to the Grange a long time ago."

"Some famous starlet you are."

"I'm a diversion, Ray. I prefer it that way."

"I'm just teasing. I was given the impression that the Whistons were a bigger deal than this."

Emma smiles wearily at him. "Oh, don't fret, darling. You'll see a detailed report of our movements today in the gossip sheets tomorrow. Most of it will probably even be true."

"What interest is there to gossip that is mostly true?" Ray responds. "What kind of backwater is this?"

He's joking, but Emma is completely earnest. "We're a small town on a big stage. A lot of us have been here our entire lives; we've grown up together. People know me, like Clare. They aren't interested in saying ugly or hurtful things, though we get the occasional newbie scoundrel who will try out a big, scandalous lie just to get his name in the paper. Usually the reporter will have the courtesy to let me read the story and make comments before they run it. It gets tiresome sometimes, but mostly it's just part of the job. Part of being a Whiston in a small corner of space where not much of interest happens."

"I'm just being cautious today, and the media whores are being more aggressive because of the disaster. That's why we've dodged them, and why I wanted you to be careful about what you say. It isn't usually even this bad."

Ray does laugh this time, shaking his head. "It's like a perpetual high school fantasy where you're always the Homecoming Queen."

"That's not very nice."

"I'm sorry, Emma. But I'm a little overwhelmed. I never got to date the Homecoming Queen." He's not making things any better, so he takes her hand across the table and squeezes it warmly. "Honestly, I prefer things this way. I'd rather not have to be fending off cameras every time I started to feel a bit amorous around you in public. But I don't mind a few old biddies watching us and saying 'look at that lovely Whiston girl making whoopee with that stunning and charming young man. Isn't she lucky?'"

"You're outrageous!" Emma exclaims, but she flushes with pleasure at the same time.

Apparently she means it in a good way.

She adds, "You don't have the disposition to be a celebrity, Commander Marlowe. I can imagine you constantly bashing reporters with their cameras or running print journalists through with their fountain pens, when they decided to ask you a question you found offensive. You would become quite notorious."

She's probably right about that, too.

When they're finished, they meander farther along the narrow streets of the city. It becomes clear to him that she's been sticking to alternate routes and byways for some time, waiting for the press hounds to give up the chase, because now they're in the town proper. They stroll along the wide sidewalks of the fashionable business district where the buildings are older, more solid in their construction, frequently stone and unpolished steel. Here, the town fathers have done things with trees and faux 19th century gaslight poles and creeping vines to relieve the urban monotony. There's more noise here, too, as frequent cars and delivery trundles whiz past along the tarmac streets in clouds of rank diesel smoke because they can't generate enough velocity to engage their compact nuclear systems, but most of the traffic is pedestrian. Most of the pedestrians are young women trailing children, looking suitably harried, or young men in business suits looking just as harried but less attentive to their general surroundings.

Too many people recognize Emma. Too many people recognize Ray, for that matter. They're constant targets for friendly greetings, casual waves, chance conversations from bright eyed folk who seem to know them by first name, who want to ask questions about *Paraclete* or personal matters or simply to satisfy their sundry curiosities. For Ray, it is weird and disturbing and he constantly feels like he's being rude. He probably is being rude, but Emma isn't. She seems to have exactly the right answers for everyone, puffy and pleasant conversational bits that sound intimate and interested without conveying information of actual substance. She sounds, after a time, like a glowing public relations rep.

The women all want to know about Strat, about fashion, about how her mother is faring. The men want to know how Whelemat stock is doing in outer markets, about impending trade and finance treaties, about political issues that might not be filtering down accurately through the New H media conglomerates.

But everyone asks about the *Dao*.

How is Emma feeling? Is she getting ready? Has she been sleeping well? Isn't she excited? Finally, one young man in gold-rimmed glasses and an expensive suit asks the question Ray has been expecting all along: Where

will you be? What route will you be traveling? What time do you think you'll make your appearance?

(Because I'll be at the corner of such and such...)

And he says it with something like a leer and a vulpine gaze, and Ray thinks about knocking him on his ass, except Emma knows how to deal with this sort of attention. She loops her arm around his, straightens her shoulders, lifts her chin. It's a withering, imperious stance, a reminder that the young man has just breached some unspoken code of etiquette.

He folds, apologizes, slinks away, and no one else dares to follow the trail he's blazed.

But it's good, in a way. Ray begins to notice things that had escaped his attention before. There are a number of workmen out, city employees hanging garlands of wildflowers from the light poles, stringing bands of multicolored bulbs along tree branches.

As they stroll downtown, the displays become more egregious. Business owners hanging paper lanterns and kerosene or oil lamps from hooks above their shop doors, clearing out window displays to make room for more. Near the green, whole streets are blocked off by vines, thick woven and budding with hothouse flowers, all strung like ropes delineating a runway. On the green itself, workers lay fresh rows of sod, trim the edges of a careful, meandering path of white pebbles, raise yet more floral ropes along the way. The green is actually a domed hill surrounded by old, brownstone buildings stacked shoulder to shoulder. There are no road access points, just footpaths slabbed at the corners of the square. Between the buildings and the green is a concrete berm and sidewalk, but Ray can't determine what sorts of businesses the buildings house. They have no signs in their windows, though the entrances are wide, with glass doors opening onto spacious foyers. Probably government offices, he thinks, or Whiston private holdings.

At the crest of the hill is a statue, a bronzed man and woman of stunning proportions swinging a child between them. They seem to be peering skyward, their eyes elevated to the sun, but the child looks forward, inland, toward the continent, the future, New Holyoke, surging ahead as though he's about to break into a gallop, to leave the adults behind. Behind them is another figure, an angelic being with wings and crown, that points inland with a stern, demanding finger, but its gaze does not follow its arm, but is directed at the laughing child attempting to tug free of the grip of mother and father.

Emma says, "Grandfather Fram commissioned it back on Terra. It's a Garde-Freisling, exquisite in detail. It's called *Promise and Will*."

"Very subtle," Ray says, winking. "What are they building beside it?"

There's a scurry of laborers dodging in and out of a large canvas tent just to the left. Echoing down from the hilltop is the sound of hammers, drills, the bang of lumber. "They're assembling the stage for the weekend. Part of the *Dao* is a state of the colony address from the Governor and other functionaries. You'll see."

"Mmm. Political speeches. Yahoo."

"I need you to try to muster a bit more excitement than that."

"This is as excited as I get."

Emma chews her bottom lip, gives him a look full of dread. "The Forum Representatives would like you to sit on the platform with them on Sunday evening, as the special guest of the city, a show of gratitude. It won't be very entertaining, I'm afraid. Speeches and the ceremonial planting of the trees, the opportunity for our politicians to bolster their popularity ratings. I would have mentioned it to you earlier, but they just contacted us

this morning."

"Not interested."

"Ray--"

"Nope." He shakes his head fiercely. "I'm telling you; I am not in the least bit concerned with local political grandstanding. I'm not interested in being led out like somebody's prize heifer for a public showing."

"But people are expecting you to be seen. You're something of a hero."

"For what, Emma? What did I do? Because I certainly didn't keep *Paraclete* from exploding. I pulled your ass and mine out of the fire. That's it. Everyone else died. You tell me exactly what I did to be heroic."

It isn't fair, and he knows it. She doesn't deserve his abuse, to have him snapping at her for what probably seems like a perfectly reasonable request. But he can't stop himself. He rails at her, and she blanches like he's slapped her.

He is such an idiot. Ray sighs and shuts his eyes so he won't have to look at her. "I'm sorry. That wasn't directed at you."

"I understand," she says, sounding entirely too reasonable. "It was hard on you, losing so many friends. Harder than you've allowed yourself to show."

Ray pulls his eyelids apart, glances down at her. She smiles up at him, the type of expression you'd give someone whom you privately know is on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

"I don't think you do understand," he says, making an effort to keep his voice gentle. "I'm glad I got you out, Emma. I'm glad I got me out. But rescuing you and rescuing me happened for entirely different reasons. I'm not here because I saved you. I'm here because I have a mission to complete. I have orders on New Holyoke that take precedence over displays of public gratitude. Things are already complicated enough because everyone seems to have seen my picture and read my bio and knows who I am. I'm supposed to be anonymous--it's the only way I can work effectively. And it's only going to make my job more difficult if I'm perceived as some sort of government stooge."

And on top of that, he really had no intention of sitting around exchanging pleasantries with local big dicks while Emma and the *mhuruk-a* strolled the streets of Blackheath Grange looking to share a little civic pride with anyone who might strike her ecstatic fancy. It is not a very culturally sensitive position for him to take, he realizes, but he can't say he really gives a fuck about local customs, either.

Emma's smile fades slowly. "You didn't tell me you were working."

"I told you what I do. You can't believe I'd just let *Paraclete* go."

"EED is investigating. What can you do that they can't?"

"They don't know the things that I know."

"Then you should tell them."

Which is a completely reasonable position for her to take, but Ray frowns. "That's not the way it works. The information I have is not appropriate for inter-agency disclosure. I can't really explain it."

Emma peers closely at him, her eyes darting back and forth like he's suddenly become impenetrable. "What are you looking for?"

"What?" It is a nonsensical question she has asked. "What are you talking about, Em?"

Ray has an abrupt, odd sensation, a tingle down his spine. He looks down at her, at Emma hugging his arm, then out across the green, at the blind eyes and stone faces of the surrounding buildings. And it's all strange to him. Alien. A strange and intoxicating dissonance, as though he has stepped outside his own body, as though he perceives with sight and depth and sensations that are not his own.

Somehow he's forgotten this essential point. He's been wandering through this city, through this human habitation of streets and shops and structures, and thinking of Blackheath Grange and New Holyoke as though it was just an out of the way place, a distant and unremarkable corner of a world he knows.

But it isn't. It is not a world he knows. It's a completely different place, a different galaxy, a tiny island of human influence that daily steps farther and farther outside the bounds of Terran norms. And no matter how familiar it feels, how Terran it looks and acts, it is nothing within the bounds of his personal experience. In another generation it will be unrecognizable. It won't be New Holyoke, Terran colony--just New Holyoke. A new world. A completely alien place outside the realm of his consciousness and understanding. Maybe it's already beyond his understanding.

He looks at Emma again, her studying him, and he feels that distance.

"What is it that you seek?"

And it isn't just New Holyoke anymore. It's colonists, citizens, Emma, all in the process of becoming something that he doesn't recognize, that he can't relate to on any level except the basic biological similarity.

In another generation, they'll all be strangers to him. Aliens in the classic sense. Beings from outer space.

She places her hand against his chest, fingers splayed, but not idle. She kneads his flesh softly through the fabric of his shirt, the way a cat would, purring.

Ray catches his breath, and on the exhalation, a word tumbles out, clumsy, tripping over his tongue and lips like a ball of mud. "*Mhuruk-a*."

Emma's lips curl, a satisfied smile like deep pleasure, like recognition. "You are the one. What is it that you seek?"

Not this. This is wrong, viscerally wrong in a way that stuns his senses, makes him feel like he's reeling. The universe shifts on an axis that he has never known. New Holyoke pales around him, substance traded for essence, a place of shadows and darkness and whistling, vacant winds.

Because it isn't what he expected it to be. Not eyes behind Emma's, not a voice thick, seductive, raspy; a voice that is not Emma's issuing from her throat, her lips. Looking at him in a way that is somehow vast and deep and ancient.

What he expected was music, communal chanting, public ecstasy. Something fake, like a weird voodoo psychological sublimation. Something vaguely Las Vegas that involved dry ice and smoke machines, hidden mirrors and puppet strings, convincing entertainment.

This, this is complete cognitive displacement. It is possession, body and mind and soul, like a randomized

eruption of supernatural chaos. But it isn't random at all. It is the experience of the vessel.

Ray narrows his eyes. "Where is Emma?"

Ponderously, maddeningly, as if he's just being obtuse. "This entity is the vessel. You are the vessel. You are the one."

He has a sense that he is lurching, stumbling away, but he doesn't move. He can't make himself move, and she clings to his arm--*it* clings--and the touch is rasping, vibrating, bacterial, like a bag full of hornets. He stares at her, and he thinks of mud and subterranean passages bored smooth by molten rock and stagnant, icy water.

"Give her back," he says, sounding thin, breathless. "I want Emma, not you."

"Emma is the vessel. It is she who has offered the invitation, and the vessel is adequate for our needs. And the vessel rises, rises in joy. What of you, would you rise? Would you become one?"

"Get away from me!"

"Become glorious, excellent, the father of a new race. To join, to live, to know. I hunger. You hunger." The *mhuruk-a* knits Emma's brows, thoughtful. "But you are closed. The hunger is blunted, hidden. What is it that you seek? Become the one, and take possession of all things."

"No." All I want is Emma.

"I am, and you are, and we will be one."

In that moment, everything becomes clear to him. He trembles; his knees try to buckle. He forgets to breathe. And if he does breathe, it will only be to scream.

Because *mhuruk-a*, *shed*, they are one and the same.

Again, the universe shifts around him. The green, the city, his surroundings spring into focus with a sharpness and clarity that almost buries him beneath the weight of their reality. It leaves him gasping for air.

And Emma says, "Ray? Are you all right?"

He isn't, not at all. He's empty, a drained glass, clear and tinkling and dry as bone. He's understood nothing, grasped at fistfuls of air.

"I'm fine," he says, with a voice that sounds like choking. "I just--I was thinking."

"About your mission?"

Close enough. "Yes."

She gives him a look of pity, of understanding. "Is there anything I can do to help you?"

Run away with me, he thinks. *To the other side of the universe, away from Lilaikens, and shed and all of it. Just you and me.*

But there are questions that must be answered, debts that must be paid. He's seen the evidence assembled by the EED investigators after the *Fortitude* incident, case notes drawn up by men who didn't have access to his

knowledge base, men who didn't know what they should be looking for because Jack Holcomb didn't tell them. But they gave him a start. They showed Ray where he must begin. The first step on the path to enlightenment.

He says, "Can you take me out to the airfield?"

She parks the car in the small lot next to the office. It's a small, blue rectangle of sheetmetal attached to a warehouse of hulking steel and massive frame. The name is painted along the side in letters three meters tall: Bass-Ingersoll TransGalactic Shipping. Overhead, the rumbling engines of a cargo plane accelerate from growl to whine and the craft lifts off from a runway on the other side of a chain link fence, springing airborne like a lumbering gull. Ray can see the glimmer of the airfield's control tower off in the distance where the sun, high in the sky, strikes off the windows. Beyond it is the flat aqua sheet of the ocean with a breeze blowing inland. Smell of salt and sea, and that curious diesel stench.

Emma cuts the engine and Ray opens the passenger side door.

"Wait here," he says. "This will only take a minute."

She nods, but says nothing. She doesn't understand. He hasn't told her anything other than the name of the place and the general address. He can imagine her trying to make connections that don't exist, wondering what part of their conversation she doesn't understand.

Because she doesn't remember. She had no awareness of the *mhuruk-a*. No memory.

And he doesn't tell her.

He pushes open the front door. It's steel, without windows. There are no windows, in fact, which he likes. Inside, it looks exactly like every other shipping operation he's ever seen, military or civilian. Oil-streaked concrete floor, plastic chairs lined around the edges of the room, battered tables stacked with old newspapers, a vid terminal with the volume down. The sheetmetal walls are bare, except where there are pinup girl calendars or centerfolds tacked up with tape but still curling at the edges. A long, beaten counter that takes up half the room, dingy and sticky, with a grime covered terminal screen stacked at one end.

There's a man behind the counter. Burly, dark haired, wrapped in faded blue coveralls. He looks both bored and annoyed, chin propped on hands, elbows on the countertop, flipping through a magazine. He lifts his head as Ray enters, gives him a nod.

"What can I do for you, buddy?"

Above his left breast pocket is a patch with his name on it. Stek.

"Are you Mr. Ingersoll?"

"Yeah."

"You own this place?"

The guy straightens up, probably because Ray isn't using his friendly with the public voice. "Half of it. Something I can do for you?"

"Four months ago, you provided primary shipping services for the cargo junk *Fortitude*. Among the items you moved would have been a container of considerable size and weight, something you were told to handle with extreme care."

Ingersoll's eyes narrow. "So?"

"I need to know where it went after you unloaded it."

"Do I know you, buddy?" Ingersoll asks, grunting. "I don't think so. That means you ain't one of my customers. And if you ain't a customer, I'm not telling you nothing."

"You can tell me now, or you can tell me when I bring the EED warrant."

He snorts, crosses his arms over his chest. "You can cram your EED warrant up your ass. Our customer records are confidential."

So Ray could go through the entire, complicated rigmarole here. He could toss out some vaguely threatening legal language. He could remind the guy that EED technically oversees the New Holyoke Port Authority that grants his shipping license. He could identify himself as an EED agent operating within the bounds of investigative procedure under the auspices of the Congressional Forum and a whole bevy of other important FSA agencies.

Instead, he skirts the counter, bangs through the swinging half-door at the end. Ingersoll's eyes go wide, fierce, and he tries to put himself in the way.

"Hey!"

Ray is careful, because he might need Mr. Ingersoll shortly. He doesn't go for his throat, where a punch would incapacitate him instantly. He strikes the center of his chest instead, stepping into the blow with enough force to stagger, but not to break anything vital. Ingersoll backpedals, clutches his chest and starts to go down on one knee. Ray hooks him by the collar and slams him onto the countertop with enough force to drive what little breath he might have left from his lungs.

As far as Stek Ingersoll is concerned, the pistol Ray had tucked into his waistband appears from nowhere, with stunning speed and menacing solidity, which is precisely the effect Ray is going for here. He jams the weapon's snout into Ingersoll's cheek, digging the sharp flange of the sight into his cheekbone and thumbs back the hammer. It's a loud and frightening click, at least if you're on the barrel end.

With the threat of the pistol to hold him in place, Ray uses his other hand to slide out the tray with the terminal keypad.

"Is this system password encrypted?"

He glances over at Ingersoll, long enough to see that Ingersoll isn't in any condition to answer him--he is too busy concentrating on the gun and his seeming inability to catch his breath--and even if he did not have these things to occupy him, the concepts of *password* and *encryption* were just going to make him goggle anyway.

Ray shrugs and goes back to work.

Basic system, using a creaky spinux-variant command line interface. He pulls up a system directory, locates files conveniently named things like *warehouse*, *customers*, *orders*.

Character search on 'Fortitude'.

A whole string of entries by container shipping id. Manifest of contents. Dimensions. Weight. Shipped from. Recipient. Delivery date.

Ray skims for potential candidates, tagging them and scanning as he goes along, discards, scrolls to the next entry.

Then he stands there for several seconds, chewing the inside of his cheek.

Mechanically, he retracts his hand holding the pistol, tucks the gun away. He helps Mr. Ingersoll back to his feet and brushes at the grime the counter has left on his coveralls.

"Thank you for your assistance," Ray says. "Sorry to have troubled you."

A moment later, he's out the door.

The car rolls up the long circular drive, beneath the shelter of the manor house's stone portico. Emma prepares to shut the engine down, but Ray places his hand over hers. They haven't spoken since leaving the freight company. They haven't *really* spoken since the episode on the green. He looks at her in profile, her lips tight, staring straight ahead through the windscreen.

She knows something has passed between them.

Ray suspects she knows what that something is.

He says, "I need to take the car."

Emma pulls her hands into her lap, drops her gaze. "You don't want me to come with you."

"It's work."

But that isn't what she wants to hear. It isn't the answer to the question she did not have the courage to ask. "She was there, wasn't she? On the green. You spoke to her."

"The *mhuruk-a*."

"It's not time yet. She's early. I've felt it since we returned. She's very strong this time, anxious. She's anticipating something special, and doesn't want to wait for the *Dao*." Emma shakes her head, a tangle of windblown hair. "I'm sorry. Did it frighten you?"

She believes it did, that it has somehow fundamentally changed their relationship, otherwise she would not ask.

But Ray shrugs off the suggestion. "Not so much. She looks a lot like you." Big grin, all teeth, trying to put her at ease. "I could kick her ass if I had to. She's just a little bitty thing."

The edges of Emma's lips roll up, but she still won't face him. "I can't--I don't know what she said to you. It takes some time, in the beginning, to synchronize our perceptions, if that's the right word. For awhile, it's either her or me, one suppressing the other, an uncomfortable habitation. Later, there is harmony, but..."

"But the body isn't engineered for possession," Ray finishes. "I understand."

Now, now she turns to him, eyes downcast, as if to ask: *Do you? Do you really?*

Instead, she says, "I don't know what's happening, Ray. It's never been like this before, this insistent. It scares me. It makes me afraid of what might happen, what I might do."

"I'm sure she won't let you do anything too crazy. You're the vessel, right? It's not like she's got scads of other Whiston gals waiting in the wings to take your place."

Emma lowers her eyelids, peering at him to see if he's mocking her. "What did she say to you?"

Ray takes a breath. Serious moment. "She said I was the one. Just like your mother."

A small, relieved expression. "She wants you." Then a smile, oblique yet genuine. "Maybe it's an accommodation? Finally taking my taste into account."

"I notice, for the record, that she specifically said I was 'the one'. As opposed to 'one of the ones', plural. I'm probably going to hold her to that, though I really should have gotten it in writing."

"Does this not bother you at all?"

"I'm working on it."

"You don't think it's weird?"

She has no notion of his concept of *weird*. It's a broader horizon than most people's. "What can I say? You meet a girl. Young, stunning, smart--perfect. You decide you really like her, that you wouldn't mind spending some significant time with her. You save her from a disaster or two. That's some serious relationship raw material there. You figure you take the good with the bad, okay? Now, my second girlfriend, way back in high school, she had it going on like you. Pretty little redhead...but I'll spare you the details. Suffice it to say that she was hot, but she had this thing she'd do with her chewing gum, this weird like inhale that made the gum pop inside her mouth. Loud. It was annoying, and she did it constantly. Believe me, if I can live with that for nine solid months, a little walk-in visit from some supernatural bugaboo a couple days a year is not going to phase me. Completely different ends of the annoyance spectrum."

"You take the good with the bad," Emma says slowly. "You're comparing a girl who popped her chewing gum with the *mhuruk-a*?"

"Well, yeah."

"I don't understand you at all."

"Men are like that. We're complex. Mysterious."

"You'd like to believe that's true, wouldn't you?"

"Can I have the car now?"

"Do you even know how to get where you're going? I haven't shown you that much of the city."

"Hey, I'm a highly trained and sophisticated intergalactic agent of intrigue, of course I can find my way."

Besides, I know how to ask for directions."

Ray locates the offices of the *Grange Guardian* on a narrow side street well away from the downtown business district. They're practically up against the docks, in fact, where the streets aren't paved but some sort of gravel and concrete composite material prone to potholes and deep, jarring ruts. The Spider's suspension complains as he jounces it over streets a finely tuned sports car was never meant to travel, and he imagines snapping struts and grinding, deflated shock absorbers. Between the hulking forms of warehouses, Ray glimpses ocean, docks, small watercraft shuttling in and out of the bay. Portable cranes drag nets bulging with flippered violence from shipping holds. Everything smells of damp and corrosion, rust and the raw, pungent odor of fish and fuel.

He can't find an inconspicuous place to park, but it hardly matters. No one on the colony would have a Manchiti Spider but a Whiston, and he's learning that no one touches what the Whistons own. So he leaves it, top down, right on the street, tucked up against the sidewalk.

The *Guardian* building is a disreputable looking, two story slab of gray stone and salt-rimed steel. Built to last, but not necessarily to wear its age with any dignity. There are plate glass windows on either side of the front door, heavily polarized so Ray can't see inside. The name of the newspaper is painted on the outside of the glass. Above the door is another sign, old paint on stone: Bingenheimer Plastics. Ray pushes inside.

A bell tinkles overhead, announcing his arrival, but there is no one to greet him. The interior is gaudy, crumbling. Heavy metallic desks with battered terminals on top; poor quality and decidedly warped wood paneling on the walls; glaring overhead lights that give the room a purplish, bruised tinge. Everywhere, there is paper. Bundles of old newspaper, sheets, scraps, most with furious looking scribbles scrawled across them like arcane programming languages. Half a dozen calendars on the walls. Strat calendars, Terran, Holyokan. Between the desks is a lintel and a dutch door, from which issues a thunderous, mechanical pounding, a regular rhythm that is almost ear-splitting in its intensity.

Ray moves to the doorway. Beyond is a cramped space, made to look smaller than its considerable size by the wrenching, sprawling, jerking press that fills most of the room. Thomas Malcolm is there, winged by a young man and a matronly older woman, all of them print smudged and grime coated. He's wearing a canvas apron that droops past his knees and halfway up his torso, and thumbing through a sheet of newsprint so fresh it leaves smudges on his fingertips.

Malcolm looks up, sees Ray standing in the doorway and holds up paper.

"Evening edition!" He has to shout over the clangor of the press. "Got to have it on the streets before the offices close!"

It's a nice way of telling Ray to expect a wait.

Half an hour later, Malcolm emerges into the front office. He unties the strings of his apron and tosses it atop the nearest desk. The press has fallen silent, but Ray's ears are still ringing, full of the roar and din of silence.

"Came to check up on me, did you?" Malcolm says, leaning against the front of the desk opposite where Ray is standing.

"Excuse me?"

"Making sure I ran your article; the one we talked about last night. Bud Groening, my production assistant, is

loading the bundles on the truck. It'll be on the stands in another hour. I did some digging for you, back through the stacks, just in case we get an interesting response tomorrow to the article you have conveniently forgotten--you know, pipe bombs or something like that. I don't want to be the only one who knows in that case." Malcolm gives him a deprecatory grin that is only partially humorous. "You might want to poke around into the background and philosophy of our own Mr. Townshend Wright. He was quite vocal, once upon a time, about his opposition to Forum and FSA thuggery on the frontier. This was some years ago, of course, and once he ascended to the role of Director of Whelemat, he didn't have much to say on the subject. Interesting history, though, when you stop to consider who would benefit the most financially from New Holyoke's independence from the Forum and the profit-devouring charter. I'm not accusing him of being a closet Lilaiken, of course, but the parallels in rhetoric are interesting."

For a moment, Ray comes up completely blank; no idea what Malcolm is yammering on about. When he thinks about Townshend Wright, the only mental picture that develops is of a crimson faced and leering man taking pleasure in Emma's pain

Malcolm clears his throat. "You didn't come about the article."

"No. I need information."

"That's pretty good information I just gave you. Nothing I could do with it, of course, but I thought you'd find it interesting."

Ray shakes his head. He'll think about Townshend Wright later, when he can afford the distraction. "This isn't about Lilaikens. It has nothing to do with Lilaikens, in fact. I need you to tell me about the Whistons."

Malcolm arches an eyebrow, either curious or alarmed. "I don't know how to tell you this, guy, but you're closer to the situation there than I am. Or do I need to remind you that you're staying in the Whiston guest cottage?"

Ray just looks at him.

Malcolm pushes himself off the edge of the desk and waves him toward the press room. "All right. Come with me."

They push through the door, then follow the wall on the right until they reach a staircase. Malcolm leads him up, through a closed door at the top. These are Thomas Malcolm's private rooms. Living area, kitchenette, a short hall which Ray supposes leads off to a bedroom. The setup is mildly untidy, with old coffee cups and stained dishes stacked on the end tables, more dirty dishes in the sink. Newspapers other than the *Guardian* folded and stacked on cracked imitation leather armchairs. A couch with uneven springs and lumpy cushions, whose impression of imminent collapse is only slightly mitigated by the addition of a threadworn orange and yellow afghan. A desk against the far wall, beneath the windows, with its own computer terminal, but the view is the same upstairs as it was down--the blank and dingy faces of industrial warehouses.

Malcolm clears a space on one of the chairs and dumps the now indigent pile of newspapers into the center of the coffee table.

"Something to drink?"

"No."

Malcolm observes him for a moment, scratches at the day's growth of stubble on his chin. "You're disappointed. You thought the paper would be bigger. I told you I was a small fish."

"Actually, I hadn't given it any thought."

"This really isn't about Lilaikens, is it?"

"That's what I said."

"I figured you were just trying to throw me off with some mind-numbingly clever EED redirection." Malcolm heads off into the kitchen, starts a pot of coffee, speaking over his shoulder as he continues. "I thought it would be best if we talked up here, with a door or two between us--not that I don't trust Mrs. Miernicki completely, mind you. She's been with me from the start, practically, but--well, people talking about the Whistons. That has a way of getting out. It's not a blacklist you want your name on, at least not in my business."

"Not in any business," Ray corrects him. "Not around here. Isn't that true?"

Malcolm returns. He flops onto the couch and the springs groan. "You're learning."

"I need to learn more. And I think you can help me. Off the record."

The last bit elicits something like a wince of physical pain from Malcolm. "You're killing me, Marlowe. Nothing that passes through my ears or in front of my eyes is off the record."

Ray offers him a blunt, menacing scowl.

"But I can make an exception, of course. Since, I mean, you've already been so *forthcoming*, right? It's the least I can do."

"You expected last night to be a disaster. After Juliet Whiston appeared, I mean. Why was that?"

"Because she's a kook. Or didn't you notice?"

He had noticed. Couldn't help but notice...in the same way he also couldn't help but notice the anticipation with which Malcolm had witnessed it. Which is why he came here looking for answers.

"She hasn't always been that bad," Ray prompts him.

"No. And she's not normally that bad, but it gets worse this time of year. It's sort of a residual *Dao* event, I think. She comes a little unhinged, not that the family usually lets us see such things."

"But there are rumors."

"Oh, yeah. There's always a grapevine."

"What happened to her?"

"You'd really be better off asking someone connected with the family about that."

Ray shakes off his protest. "I'm asking you."

"Why me?"

"Because you know. Because you know and you'll tell me. You don't have anyone to protect with lies."

"Sure, just me. Just my own ass, thank you very much."

"You've exploited them for long enough, sold a lot of papers. You can afford to take a little risk."

That gets him. Malcolm bounds half off the couch, his face red. "You really don't get it, do you? What do you think is going on here? You think we just trot the Whistons out like our own pet celebrities when we feel like it?"

"Yes."

Ray's flat, implacable tone stops him, like running into a wall. Malcolm sits back down. "Then you're more dense than I thought you were. Or you're letting the smell of Emma Whiston's fine ah, womanhood, cloud your judgment."

"I think I'm seeing with more clarity than you realize."

But Malcolm isn't ready to let his point go. "We don't run anything, anything at all about the Whistons without their approval. No one does. Not the vid crews, the net press, nobody. They control the media and everything we say, Marlowe."

"The nebulous 'they'."

"Frederick, Emma, even their majordomo, Amah. All of them."

"And how is that?"

Malcolm splays his hands in frustration, as if this should be obvious. "Where do you think the news feed comes from? Not the reports, but the feed itself. Where do we get it?"

"Along a relay beam."

"A beam from beacon to beacon to satellite to network. Who do you think owns the beacons, the satellites and the network infrastructure?"

Ray nods. "The Whistons."

"Right. And they can shut us off any time they see fit. They can drop a cowl of darkness over the entire planet. Information is power, Marlowe. Control the news and you control the population. You can't even say that much without risking reprisals. We exist, just like everyone else, on the Whistons' whim. I'm sure they've all told you about the trials they endure, about how we exploit their notoriety. That's true, of course, but it's not the whole picture. They exploit us just as ruthlessly. They threaten us with cutting off our feed if we don't comply, if we raise our voices against them. It's the same for everybody even remotely connected with them. They always have something you need to survive. They make certain of it."

"Even Whelemat?"

"Especially Whelemat. Without the Whiston imprimatur, without the Whiston shipping network and Whiston cash to keep everything afloat, even Whelemat crashes. They're decades away from a sustaining profitability. So you see what we're looking at here? New H is an exciting new colony, attractive to settlers because it has space, jobs, opportunity--but nobody gets in, including competing business, because the Whistons have an exclusive charter. That means all the money, all the resources, all the infrastructure is funded from Whiston coffers. They own it. They can do with it as they see fit."

"Their own private fiefdom," Ray says.

"Which is why talking to you is not such a good idea for me, not unless you've got a hole I can hide in until the next starship comes though...oh, wait, that's assuming it doesn't get blown out of the sky before it gets here."

"I'm not asking you to print this up as a news story, Malcolm. I just want to know what's going on."

"And you think no one is going to figure out who told you?" Malcolm snorts angrily. "You parked the Whiston car right outside my front door!"

Ray sighs. It comes to this, and it comes to this, and it comes to this. Always, and he hates it, because when he has to act like a CIU agent every time he turns around, it means that he's starting to narrow his focus. It means that answers are close, and that events are going to begin unfolding with alarming speed. It means things are about to hurtle out of control.

He pulls out the pistol, sets it in his lap where Malcolm can see it.

"I appreciate that you're in a difficult position," Ray says, calm and savage at once. "Unfortunately, my mission parameters aren't designed to accommodate your well-being. If they dictated that I sacrifice the lives of twelve thousand people aboard *Paraclete*...you see where I'm going."

Malcolm glances at the gun, chuckles lightly. He rises from the couch and heads over to the kitchenette, to the coffee pot, without giving Ray another look.

It is not the sort of reaction Ray has come to expect.

"Do you want coffee?"

"Sure." Ray slips the gun back into his waistband.

Malcolm returns, hands him a mug, then takes his seat back on the couch. "You're not EED, are you? Not that I ever thought you were, by the way. You don't seem to have a broomstick up your ass. What, some special, covert branch?"

Ack. "Yes."

"I wondered as soon as I'd heard that the Whistons had escaped with an FSA officer. EED guys aren't going to abandon the ship, but you covert ops guys are slippery." Malcolm shakes his head, still laughing softly. "And that half-assed, ultra-cool crap you were serving at dinner last night about leading up some anti-Lilaiken investigatory team--that was just crap. I want you to know that. You should spend less time trying to convince people you're something you're not. It makes the legend weak when you have to explain it so much."

"Maybe I should have just shot you to begin with and gotten it over with."

"Hey, I'm just saying. It's a professional critique."

"Are you going to tell me what I need to know?"

"Now that I know you're a secret agent, you mean? Like I'm supposed to expect that spook guys can keep secrets better than EED guys? Or is it because I know that as a spook guy you're more likely to shoot me in the kneecaps for not being suitably cooperative? Why would I *not* tell you now, Marlowe? You've already

ruined me. I told you that. You've probably been jumping through spooky little covert hoops all day long, leaving behind you a breadcrumb trail of raised eyebrows and excited suspicions. A path right to my door. Even if I didn't answer you, people would assume I had and I'd still be ruined. At least this way I get some satisfaction that you'll actually do something about the situation this colony is in."

"The situation?" Ray asks.

"You want to know about Juliet Whiston, well that's the situation. They're the same deal. The same issue. What has gone on with the Whistons now and as far back as this colony remembers--probably even earlier than that--has everything to do with our current screwed up condition."

Ray doesn't even know where to begin. He isn't prepared with questions that delve as deeply as Malcolm has already gone.

"Tell me."

"You know that Juliet Whiston was a Trust baby, right? You heard her say that?"

Ray nods.

"Okay, the backstory is that she was something like ten or eleven when she migrated. She was Terran, I think, or Martian originally. I don't exactly recall, but the Trust found her, brought her in, educated her. By all accounts, she was stunning. Brilliant, sophisticated, beautiful. The Whistons lavished extra special care on her, this being Fram and Erina. They were very taken with her, some would say especially taken with her since their own daughter, Ann, was in serious physical decline already, even back then. I think Ann was in her early twenties when she passed away. So as Ann deteriorated, Juliet increasingly assumed the role of Whiston daughter. Erina or Amah--not the one you know, but her mother. Amah is a title, not a name--anyway, one or the other of them was always leading young Juliet about, managing her social engagements, exposing her to the colony's elite social circles.

"By the time she was sixteen or seventeen, it had become pretty clear that she was being groomed not just as a replacement for Ann, who died in the interim, but as the future bride of Charles, Frederick and Emma's father. Two problems with that: Charles was ten or fifteen years older than Juliet, so it was something of a scandal that she had been selected for him as early as ten years old. More importantly, Juliet wasn't interested in him. When she migrated, she had developed in passage, a deep attachment to another Trust child, a young man named Martin Schmidt.

"There is probably something else you should be aware of. The Trust is not an orphanage system. They do not troll human space for any and every kid that becomes a ward of the state. They take the best kids. Bright, talented, top IQ's, kids who are way above the norm. The Trust turns around and gives them the best education and training and developmental help that money can buy. The understanding has always been that the Trust was designed to churn out talent and abilities that the colony desperately needed to not only survive, but advance.

"Martin Schmidt was every bit Juliet's intellectual and social equal. They were a lovely couple. You can see them if you look at some of the image archives at the large papers. He was dark, pale, brooding. She was light, vivacious, fabulous. Charles Whiston was nothing like them. He was more like his son, Frederick. Smart enough, but not exceptional. Slick. Shrewd. Charles was the first real sign to the colony's leaders, I think, that the Whiston family was in decline. Fram was the last of the great ones, and Charles measured up very poorly indeed compared to him. That Fram and Erina would even imagine that Juliet was interested in Charles over Martin was ludicrous to anyone who observed the family."

Malcolm pauses, grips his mug of coffee in both hands. He seems to be staring not at Ray, but through him, disturbed. "And then Martin Schmidt died. He was eighteen, apprenticing with the mining engineers at Wheleamat. There was some sort of accident, a tunnel collapse, and Martin was trapped. It took them three days to dig him out, but the tunnel only held two days' worth of air.

"Understandably, perhaps, Juliet went into seclusion for several months. She never left the Grange, was rarely seen even outside the manor house. She lost weight, energy, that signature vivacity that Emma comes close to capturing, but even she isn't as splendid as her mother was. When she emerged--just a few days before the *Dao*, the one she told you about--she was a human shipwreck. Completely broken, it seemed. She surprised everyone by assuming Ann's former role in the public ceremonies as the vessel of the *mhuruk-a*. That was a big shock, because it was laced with contextual meanings that might not be immediately clear to you. The vessel has always been a Whiston, as long as the colony has been in existence. It's part of the ritual, this symbolic sharing of the Whiston women, the Whiston fortune, the Whiston largesse, with the community.

"So it was less of a shock afterward, within the month, that the announcement was made of Charles and Juliet's engagement. Certainly, some people were scandalized, given that Fram had once again gotten exactly what he had intended all along. There was even the rumor going about that Martin's accident hadn't been much of an accident at all. But none of it could be proven, and no one knew what had gone on at the Grange while Juliet was in mourning. Perhaps it was nothing so sinister at all; perhaps Juliet was emotionally vulnerable and Charles stopped being Charles long enough to show her something of value inside himself.

"I do know that she seemed reasonably happy afterward. Not nearly as luminous as she had once been, but that's understandable given the way her life had been touched by tragedy. She was much beloved in the four or five years before Frederick was born, then Emma a couple of years later. She performed all of her public duties, *Dao* and otherwise. She and Charles seemed to get along well enough, at least, you would assume so if you believe the media accounts--which you can't, of course, because they were vetted by Charles before they were printed."

"And all this time, she was going mad?" Ray asks.

Malcolm shrugs. "That's open for interpretation. If she was crazy, it didn't come out in public, and it was a closely guarded family secret. My guess is that she suffered some sort of breakdown when Charles died suddenly, shortly after Juliet's pregnancy with Emma was made public. I think she was three or four months along, then. That was her last real public appearance, that announcement."

"And Charles was killed how?"

"Construction accident, apparently. They were adding a wing to the manor house, the Trust administrative offices, I believe. They were placing one of the main slabs, using a crane. One of the cables snapped. Charles couldn't get out of the way in time. So the story goes."

Ray squints at him, curious. "But you don't believe it?"

"I don't have any reason not to believe it. There's no evidence to the contrary, and Charles was very hands-on with all of his construction projects. It's plausible."

"But that doesn't make it true."

Malcolm hesitates, takes a long drink of coffee. "I could never confirm it. I couldn't even set about trying. Who would I ask?"

"The construction crew, for one."

"All internal labor. Domestics, Trust babies, Amah's clan. They don't talk about Whiston affairs."

Ray remembers, something that Emma said to him once. "The Dag Maoudi are more Whiston than the Whistons."

Malcolm looks at him strangely, but says nothing. Ray takes off on another track. "This other kid, Martin Schmidt. Do you think he was murdered?"

"There's no factual evidence to support that," Malcolm responds, but he tenses, and that's enough for Ray.

"You think he was."

"I think the Trust and the Whistons have an alarming tendency to lose kids to accidents. Perfectly reasonable accidents, you understand, given the type of careers they're steered toward. Mine engineering, rail construction, planetary mapping. These are all fields that carry considerable physical risk."

Ray nods in understanding. He knows a thing or two about the murder of Trust babies. "And if the Whistons or someone within their circle with sufficient authority says that there was an accident, there's no one who can question them."

"That, my friend, is the situation I was describing to you earlier. You want to know about Juliet Whiston. All I can give you is the public record as the Whistons have crafted it. Whether or not the details correlate at all with the truth is a matter beyond my ability to speculate. Would you like a bit of advice, Marlowe?"

"Sure."

"If you want to know about Juliet Whiston, ask her. She's the only one who knows the truth, and I think she's been waiting a long time to find someone who she can trust with her secrets."

Ray thinks he might just have to do that. And sooner rather than later. But he says, "One more question. What do you think of this whole deal--the *Dao*, the *mhuruk-a*? What does it mean to someone who actually lives here?"

Malcolm flaps his hands at Ray, spilling the remains of his coffee as he does so. He grins. "Hell, Marlowe, you don't want to ask me a question like that. I'm just a crusty old newspaperman. I don't have time for sentimentality."

"Then you don't believe in it. It's just a public ceremony. Symbolic, like Christmas or the Fourth of July, just as Towshend Wright was saying."

"I think it's a way for the Whistons to get their rocks off without causing a scandal."

"The Whiston women, anyway. Doesn't that strike you as an interesting dynamic?"

"This is really bugging you, isn't it? Emma has gotten under your skin."

Which is true. "That's not why I'm asking."

"Really? Why is it, then?"

Because I've seen things you can't even imagine. "I noticed an interesting thing at dinner last night."

Malcolm stiffens a bit, exactly the reaction Ray would expect. "Did you?"

"There's a look to the Whistons. Quite distinctive. All those portraits on the walls..."

"Which is why you came here. Why you're asking me instead of someone else, and why you'd believe I'd tell you. I hadn't realized my axe grinding was so obvious.." Ray doesn't interrupt, doesn't respond. Just lets him go. "I figured I had finally gotten old and flabby enough that it wouldn't be so obvious anymore. It just about destroyed my father, raising Fram's illegitimate son. Even with the stipend--the generous stipend--the family paid my mother, he never did get over it."

Malcolm transitions from amused to quietly bitter in the space of a few heartbeats. "Of course, the disenfranchised heir would be more interested in Whiston family history. More prone to digging out narratives that aren't exactly the public ones. It's not like I'm the only one." He laughs harshly, barking. Ask Towshend Wright who his father was. We Whiston bastards are everywhere. Children of the *Dao*."

Father?

"Fram Whiston was your father." He's thunderstruck, dizzy.

"The *mhuruk-a* hasn't always selected the Whiston women as the vessel. I guess an outrageous libido can run on both sides of the family. Sometimes both at once."

Male *and* female vessels.

Malcolm goes on. "It is a strange rite, the *Dao*, completely alien in some ways to those of us who grew up so heavily influenced by Western Terran thought and concepts of lineage. Of paternity, I should say. The powerful have always generated their share of bastard children, pretenders to the throne, as it were. But it's always been the men who did it, the men who guarded the virtue and the monogamy of their wives--because they were interested in heirs. Certainly, the Whistons want heirs. They want pure Whiston blood to inherit, but there are tests for those sorts of things now. The illegitimate children can be ruled out before they're even born."

"What are you saying?"

"Juliet Whiston has borne two dozen *Dao* children, exceptional children adopted by the Trust. That's what it is, Marlowe. The *Dao* is genetic loading. It's a eugenic experiment. The creation of a whole race of men and women bred specifically to enhance the Whiston line. To disperse the traits they value among the general population."

Two dozen? Juliet Whiston had conceived two dozen children that she had turned over to the care of the Dag Maoudi? No wonder she was mad.

"It's more effective, of course, when the vessel is a male Whiston. Two days of debauchery can generate quite a handful of offspring. The women are pretty much one shot deals, so they have to be more selective."

"I don't--"

Malcolm holds up a hand to stop him. "I know, you're wondering about Emma. How many little critters she's got running around the Trust? She's quite the disappointment, honestly. Her and Frederick both. He, of course, was never allowed to be the vessel, and she's either been unwilling or unable to produce any *Dao* children. There are whispers that she's either barren despite the best efforts of medical science, or she's doing something to prevent herself from conceiving. I lean toward the latter, myself. I like Emma. She's a nice kid, different

somehow than that chaotic mess of a family she spring fro, seems to have a good head on her shoulders. My sense is that she'd be more than happy for the *Dao* to just go away. She understands that its time has passed."

Malcolm stops himself there, offers a wry, apologetic shrug. "I suppose that's not much consolation to you, is it? It doesn't change the fact of her experience with the *Dao*, but I also think it changes everything for her, Marlowe. That's why she's latched onto you so tightly. She's tired of it. She's tired of the things her heritage requires of her. More than anything else, Emma Whiston is desperate for you to rescue her from becoming like her mother. And I think her family is just as determined to stop you."

Later, well after sundown, he parks the car in a small lot next to the glass and steel superstructure of the Whelemat buildings. They're modern, low-slung blocks, ostentatious only because the rest of the city is not. The construction is neatly clustered to obscure the view of the more utilitarian and ugly concrete box of the original Whelemat facility, strung together by a series of elevated and enclosed walkways. Even from the ground, the network resembles a dense and faintly incestuous hive.

An hour ago, after he was done with Thomas Malcolm, Ray stopped at a public comm and sent a flare to the Whelemat office requesting an interview with Townshend Wright. The call was intercepted first by an automated response system, then shunted to a secretary who managed to be completely unimpressed with his celebrity credentials. Mr. Wright didn't have time for an interview today. He would be tied up at the office well into the evening.

It was exactly what Ray needed to know.

He climbs out of the car, scanning the buildings. Most of the windows are dark, except for a few offices belonging to ambitious up-and-comers. But there are lights filtering out from the lobby of the central spire, and lights above, near the top floor.

Ray enters the building through the front doors. The lobby could belong to any corporate office on Terra. Elegantly tiled floors, vaulted ceiling, sterile concrete. There are planters along the walls containing conspicuous greenery, fern-like, obviously plastic. In the center, a gurgling, art nouveau fountain in which people have tossed loose change, and a sign posted on the low wall surrounding it asking people not to pitch coins into the fountain. Amusing.

Beyond is a security station softened up with cheerily polished wood and relaxed curving architecture so that it resembles a broad reception desk. But the man standing behind it is wearing a Whelemat security uniform and a pistol in the holster beneath his left arm.

Ray approaches him, smiling. "I'm here to see Townshend Wright."

The guard looks him over suspiciously. "You have an appointment, I assume."

"No. But flare him and let him know Ray Marlowe is here to see him. He'll see me."

His newfound celebrity seems to work on *someone*, at least. The guard stiffens when Ray says his name and immediately reaches for the comm unit. Ray grins at him like a man who expects nothing less. The conversation that follows is not a pleasant one by the indications on the guard's face.

There's a Ray Marlowe here to see you, sir. Frown, confusion. *No, he says he doesn't have an appointment, but that you would like to speak with him.* Deeper frown, with a flick of the eyes in Ray's direction. Suspicion that he's about to be slaughtered. *No, sir, I did not inquire about the nature of his business.* Wince. Probably

some shouting going on. At the very least, some coarse language. Then he sets his jaw, scowling. *I asked him if he would like to schedule something for tomorrow, sir, but he's quite insistent that he must speak with you at once.* Ray decides he likes this guy. Security guards and secretaries are the sergeants of the corporate world. They can always fuck you harder than you can fuck them. And most of them know it. It pays to remember that; pays even bigger to remember and be nice about it.

The guard sets down the comm. "Mr. Wright will see you now."

"Sorry for the hassle."

"No hassle at all, Mr. Marlowe. The elevators are down the chute to the left. Go all the way up."

As a plan of attack, it beats the daylight's out of breaking and entering.

He takes the ride, clicking through a couple dozen floors that announce their passage with a merry ping. The lift doors open on the top floor, and he's met by a young woman in dark skirt, tight blouse. Very pretty, very nervous, light hair tousled in a way that can't help but be revelatory.

"You must be Mr. Wright's personal trainer," Ray says.

It confuses her. "I'm his assistant."

"Same difference. Is it just the two of you?"

She understands then, momentarily looks outraged, then runs her fingers through her hair. "Yes."

Ray says to her, "You should go home now."

"I'm working, Mr. Marlowe."

"So am I. Go home. I'll make sure Mr. Wright is informed."

He's blunt, threatening. She gets the message. "I'll just grab my coat."

"And I'll let myself in, if you'll point the way."

She directs him down the hall to his left, past another reception desk and the more potted fake plants. "The doors at the end."

He nods his thanks and wanders away. The lift pings as she leaves a few seconds after. At the end of the corridor, Ray hits the doors at full stride, not bothering to knock. Townshend Wright, flushed and greedy and predatory, just as Ray recalled him, stands behind a large chrome and black metal desk, his back to the windows. Ray approaches swiftly, rolling his eyes around the room, taking stock. It's a nice office, spacious. The desk, two chairs of the same motif in front. Off to the side, a conference table with a dozen more chairs, sophisticated data display terminal and wall screen. A well appointed bar beyond that. Pictures on the walls of Townshend Wright grinning beneath a Wheleamat hard hat at assorted mining sites that look isolated, adventure prone, rough and tumble.

Wright makes a visible effort not to look annoyed. "Well, Mr. Marlowe, this is quite a surprise. I meant to make more of an effort the other evening to chat with you, but--well, you know how unscripted those social engagements can be."

"Sure. You were too busy waiting to see if Frederick Whiston was going to rape his sister right there in the dining room to be much of a conversationalist."

Wright freezes for a moment, unable to respond. He is probably not used to be spoken to this way, and stunned is the way Ray prefers him. It's good to keep people who believe themselves to be heavy hitters off balance. You live and die on the inside half of the plate. Ray drops into the chair closest to him. "By the way, I sent your assistant home for the evening. I think she was rather relieved, to be honest."

It's interesting, watching Townshend Wright restrain his urge to erupt. He glowers at Ray, but only irritation seeps into his voice.

"You owe me an apology for that, then. Ms. Roswell and I were just beginning to get down to business prior to your interruption. A little pre-*Dao* transaction, you understand."

He's so cool, so shameless.

"Is there something I can help you with, Mr. Marlowe? I assume you didn't come here just to insult me." He returns Ray's nonchalance with a hard-edged smile. "Or should I say Commander Marlowe. This is a business call, isn't it? You're on the clock, as it were."

"You're quick."

"You don't get to my position without being quick. Quicker than the competition, at least. And more ruthless. But most of all, less afraid than others to cut directly to the chase. So let's do that rather than trading barbs, shall we? You're with EED. You were sent here to investigate Lilaiken insurgency in frontier space. I have an interesting past notable for anti-Forum statements on the basis of their strangulating trade agreements with this and other colonial states. I also have the financial power to support a local Lilaiken effort, despite the fact that there are no records indicating that I've ever done such a thing, or any evidence linking me to known members of the Lilaiken separatist movement. Am I getting close?"

Ray frowns. "You left out the part about me despising you personally, but that's probably just a bonus."

"I've been quite thoroughly investigated by your colleagues here, Commander. If you would examine the relevant case files, you'd see that my politics fall well short of violence as a suitable means of provoking change. In fact, I'd bet my opinions on the Lilaiken movement align fairly well with your own, at least as they're represented in Mr. Malcolm's broadsheet ravings from this afternoon's paper."

Quick and well informed. Ray is going about this all wrong, he realizes. Townshend Wright isn't impressed by bluster and bluntness, vague threats. Still a jerk of course, but an alarmingly competent one.

"It's all business with you, then," he says slowly.

Across from him, Townshend Wright takes his seat, leans back in his chair, completely at ease. "Not business. Money and power. I'll admit that without mealy-mouthing it. Lilaiken violence is bad for trade, so even though I might agree with them in principle, I'm not fool enough to lend them any sort of assistance. There's no profitability in it."

"It must really irk you, then, to be just another Whiston lackey. You build it, they take the dividends. Forever just a big fish in a small pond, because just like everyone else, you subsist on the family whims. That's got to be a real shot for the ego."

Wright laughs. "Do you bother to do any research on your social environment before you go blundering in,

Marlowe? I assume you're trying to be clever, but you've obviously been drawing too many of your 'facts' from the local tabloids."

"Then why don't you enlighten me?"

"Do you honestly believe the Whistons have any control over me? Over this corporation?"

"Other than the obvious fact of their ownership, you mean."

"You're also apparently not a student of intergalactic corporate finance. I assume by *ownership*, you mean the fact that the Whistons are entitled to a generous dividend share of our profits. Or maybe you refer to poor, drunk Frederick's inherited position as titular president of our Board of Directors. Or the fact that the Forum settlement charter was granted to the Whiston family.

"While that does seem interesting on the surface, let me share with you a little secret, something that might have escaped your notice given the intimacy of your ties to the Whistons and the insidious filtering effect they have on information relative to themselves and their affairs. The Whelemat Corporation will begin trading public stock on the Terran Exchange in just a bit more than six months from today. My idea, approved by the Board. Frederick didn't even bother to attend the vote. At that time, the Whiston stake in this business, besides their contractual dividend payment, will be less than fifteen percent of the complete holding. They won't be the majority stockholder any longer. They will have no claim to ownership. Would you care to hazard a guess as to who will possess controlling interest in this corporation?"

Ray shakes his head. He wonders what Thomas Malcolm would make of this piece of information. "My God, you're an asshole."

"You know, I *am* an asshole. Fram and Charles were assholes, too. It takes an asshole to be successful in this environment, which both Emma and Frederick most assuredly are not."

"And since you can push them around, and you're not above exploiting the trust they've placed in you, you're going to push them out. For the good of the colony, I suppose."

Wright laughs. "For the good of the colony, indeed. But not nearly as financially beneficial to the unwashed masses as to myself personally. The Whistons are a dwindling root, Marlowe. The Terran Whiston Corp saw this early on and cut them off before they became an embarrassment. Now the New Holyoke interests have followed suit, and our Terran cognates were more than pleased to continue our previous business relationship. It has become abundantly clear that the Whistons no longer have the vision or the capability of creating meaningful social or business structures. Because they're *weak*. They're delicate of hand, rigid of mind, spoiled by wealth and status and entitlement. In another generation, even their cultural influence will be gone, and with it, all of the privileges and controls over this colony that they currently enjoy. With our new financial footing and revenue streams, Whelemat will be profitable inside two years. We won't need Whiston money or influence to keep us afloat. Divorced from us, they have nothing. No control whatsoever. It's only a matter of time after that before the citizens of our fair planet realize they don't need the Whistons either, and that they definitely would rather not be under the Whiston proprietary charter. New Holyoke is grateful to the Whistons, Marlowe, for what they've done historically. But we've built them monuments. We've made them wealthy and famous and adored. We've paid the debt that we owed them with the sweat of our brows. But their time has passed; they simply haven't realized their irrelevance yet."

Wright stops, arches an eyebrow at Ray. "This, of course, seems to have nothing to do with the Lilaiken business that brought you here. But that's not right, is it? You came to me because you believed I was part of the Lilaiken conspiracy, and as a Whiston lackey--as you so generously put it--my culpability would by logical extension implicate Frederick as a conspirator."

"Yes." If he should lie at this point, he doesn't have enough sense to see it.

"Which is something you desperately wish to be true. And Frederick, whom you have met, operating as a Lilaiken agent or even as some sort of even quasi-effective tool of the Lilaiken movement...that doesn't strike you as being a ludicrous proposition?"

"It's possible."

"Hardly," Wright says dismissively. "And what makes you think there is such a burgeoning Lilaiken presence on New Holyoke in the first place? Have you asked yourself why, if such a presence exists, no one from your own department has been able to verify any of its constituents?"

"Aren't you forgetting about *Paraclete*?"

"Not at all. Aren't you making assumptions that aren't warranted?"

"EED has gathered significant and compelling evidence that the *Paraclete* incident is causally linked to a previous Lilaiken attack on the cargo freighter *Fortitude*."

"How nicely ambiguous."

"You remember *Fortitude*, I assume."

"Of course. Terrible tragedy. Lives wasted for no purpose." Wright grins at him across the table. "And I assume you have a connection in mind other than the fact that the Lilaikens claimed responsibility for the *Fortitude* event."

Wright is mocking him, and all Ray can do is snarl. "Look, if I'm asking the wrong questions, why don't you tell me what you know about it, then?"

"Because I've told you everything I know. I'm certain my sources in this matter are much less knowledgeable than yours." Ray doesn't believe him at all, suspects that he isn't even supposed to believe him. Townshend Wright is flaunting that fact that he is a man who lets very little escape his network of information. "Of course, if I was in your position, I would be asking myself why it is that the Lilaikens were so interested in targeting a rogue freighter piloted by a captain known to have had an extensive black market shipping reputation. One of their own most reliable mules, to put it baldly. Not interested only in removing one of their tested assets, mind you, but in claiming responsibility for it in advance of the other, shall we say, more politically productive targets that have followed. Uncharacteristic of them, to incur so much risk to make such a negligible statement. It is hardly a resounding shot across the bow if its significance only becomes apparent when considered in light of subsequent events."

"What are you suggesting? That *Fortitude* wasn't a Lilaiken attack?"

Wright holds his hands up playfully. "Not at all. I'm only pointing out curiosities that couple in interesting patterns with New Holyoke's less than hospitable political environment."

Ray shakes his head. "I have sources of intelligence that suggest otherwise."

"Then you would do well to re-examine the conclusions reached by your intelligence. Or perhaps your sources in the first place." Wright smiles wickedly at him. "But I'm not one to tell another man how to do his job."

"Maybe you'd be more interested in telling me what *Fortitude* was hauling for you, then."

The Whelemat director's eyes practically sparkle. It does not constitute the bomb Ray had hoped it would be. "Now you've reached the compelling evidence toward which you have so painstakingly ascended. The glass becomes less clouded, yes? What makes you believe I had any dealings with *Fortitude*, Mr. Marlowe? With it, and by extension, these Lilaiken scoundrels."

"A Terran shipping container that had been aboard that ship was delivered to Whelemat via Bass-Ingersoll. You might remember it. Large, heavy, fragile. Addressed to Frederick Whiston."

"We take a large number of deliveries both for the company and for the Whistons, as you might imagine. Several large and heavy and fragile ones, as a matter of fact. And it's a rare package that I sign for personally. Perhaps if you spoke with our receiving manager..."

"*Fortitude* was a Lilaiken mule. You just said so yourself."

"Indeed. I should also have reminded you that we are a *frontier* colony. We place more importance on reliability of service and fee structures than political affiliations. Captain Karluk was very reliable and very reasonable when he wanted to be. Believe me, Whelemat felt the loss of *Fortitude* more deeply than most."

"And that relationship places Whelemat under suspicion of having taking possession of stolen Terran historical artifacts. I'm sure EED and the Congressional Forum, as well as a number of federal oversight departments, would welcome the opportunity to examine your books for this and other business irregularities."

"Wonderful! Now you are beginning to enjoy yourself! In my experience, nothing pleases a Forum agent more than leveling threats against the powerless." Wright claps his hands together, gleeful and completely nonplussed. "You'll start your investigation into our fiscal improprieties with a detailed survey of the Whiston holdings, I assume, since the package in question was addressed to Mr. Whiston in the first place."

Townshend Wright would like that, Ray realizes. He would appreciate someone taking the time to cast a pall of doubt over Frederick Whiston's legitimacy as president of Whelemat's Board of Directors. It would make Wright's assumption of control that much less complicated to have the Whiston obstacle removed in advance.

Ray is being whipped in this game so thoroughly, it has become embarrassing.

"The artifact in question was stolen by Lilaiken radicals. It was transported aboard a Lilaiken ship. It was delivered to Whelemat as a proxy for Frederick Whiston. And I think you know exactly what I'm talking about, unless, that is, you're in the habit of receiving Lilaiken contraband."

Wright stops clapping, presses his hands together, sighs. "Mr. Marlowe, I'm certain that you're a very good field agent for the EED. I have no doubts that you have acquired a file full of citations and a chest full of medals, but you are out of your depth here. You are an anchorless vessel tossed from storm to storm and listing out of your proper depth. Three days you've been on New Holyoke. Three days! How can you expect to understand what goes on here? To take any of the facts you acquire in their appropriate context?"

Ray continues, fierce and adamant. Maybe he can bludgeon Wright into submission. "In this shipping container was a ring of stone. It would have been massive. A dozen men couldn't lift it without a hydraulic loader. I need to know what was done with it."

"As part of your Lilaiken conspiracy?"

"Yes."

"Can I give you a piece of advice, Mr. Marlowe?"

"Fine, as long as you tell me about the ring."

Wright frowns, his lips pressed together, disappointed. "Stop looking for Lilaikens here. They don't exist. They're phantoms created by the FSA to justify the existence of an otherwise useless EED outpost to Forum accountants. Whatever was inside that shipping container, and I claim no direct knowledge of it whatsoever, but whatever *was* inside had less to do with politics than with religion. You've been examining our world through lenses tinted by your experience. You are the proverbial man with the hammer, to whom every problem appears to be a nail--a Lilaiken nail.

"In two days, the *Dao Maed Vitouri* will begin, and you've made no effort whatsoever to understand its significance, to understand the grip it has on this colony, on our past, our future, on the Whistons themselves. I have told you that they are a family in decline, and their beloved *Dao* is the reason for it. But behind the *Dao* is the Dag Maoudi. They are the ones you should be asking about this stone."

I am the vessel. You are the one.

"Yes, you're such an opponent of the *Dao*." Ray scowls at him. "I've seen the way you look at her, like meat, like a rape fantasy. You like what they've done to her. You participated in it."

Townshend Wright shakes his head wearily. "And I'm a member of the local Masonic lodge, too. I sponsor baseball teams in the spring and football squads in the autumn. I contribute to the city's fledgling college. I fulfill all the duties and expectations that come with my position. It's about context, Ray. Social context, cultural context. And as long as that context exists, the Dag Maoudi have power."

"Even over Whelemat?"

"Over everything. While we must, we make concessions. And when their time has passed, when the last of them has finally crawled away and died...well, that's when things will change. But not until then."

"Concessions like receiving their stolen property, or like facilitating the transport of those items through non-registered Lilaiken haulers? But not like wresting away control of the financial empire that supports them."

"The Dag Maoudi have no interest in Whelemat. All that touches them is the *Dao*. The *Dao* and everything it means to them. In matters of religion, the Dag Maoudi do as they choose and we allow them to do so because the consequences would be disastrous."

"That artifact is dangerous, Wright."

The Whelemat director hesitates for a moment, chews his bottom lip. It's the first time Ray has seen him look anything but confident. Quietly, he says, "And so are the Dag Maoudi. You'll see that, I imagine. Sooner than you wish and too late to save yourself."

"Why are you telling me this?"

Towshend Wright offers a wan smile. "Because you are so obviously wrong."

And because he is tired of being told what to do.

"Believe what you choose to believe, Marlowe. Maybe the Lilaikens did destroy *Fortitude* and *Paraclete*, just

as you say. Maybe Frederick Whiston has secretly been using Whelemat assets to support the radical movement all along. I'm not part of the Lilaiken movement, so perhaps their logic escapes me. I am just a businessman, and I believe I have a certain sense for activities which produce counterproductive results. But it wouldn't be the first time I was mistaken."

What was it he had said? Why destroy *Fortitude*? It had done its job, delivered its cargo. What was there to gain?

Except...except, except. Nothing but attention.

Counterproductive attention in the grand scheme of things.

Ray rises abruptly. He's done with this. He's done with Townshend Wright.

"I get it," he says.

Townshend Wright hardly acknowledges him as he turns and departs. But as the doors to the Whelemat director's office close behind him, he believes he can hear him chuckling after him all the way down the hall to the lift.

It is not a happy sound.

Chapter Seven

On Thursday or whatever the locals call it, Ray rises late, having slept for hours. Too many hours, really, paying back the checks against he has written against his body in recent days. He wakes in the early afternoon with the heat of the sun on his face and sweat in his hair, in his eyes, coating his limbs like oil. And he remembers what it used to be like, before boot camp, before the desert, when he was still in high school. Late summer, when the whole world smelled of sweet corn and sycamore leaves and stuck in his nose because of the humidity. When the only thing on his mind was finding a way to get laid. In those days, he'd lie in bed for half an hour or more, slowly circling toward wakefulness, maybe spend a few minutes imagining plausible scenarios in which the lovely and libidinous Sarah Ferguson would burst into his room now. Or now. Or now. (It never seemed to work.) Burst in and confess not so much her undying love as her immodest demand for instant sexual gratification. Sarah Ferguson still remains his all time jerk off queen if judged by quantity.

Time changes everything. Time and age. Today when he wakes late, all he can think about is the lost hours, wasted productivity, murderers, and *shed* and all the things he learned. Everything he has yet to do.

These are the things that get grown men out of bed, and he hates it. Hates it, but throws off the blankets, groans past his assorted aches and stitches and bullet tracks, jumps into the shower. Even when he emerges, dripping fat diamonds of cool and pungent New Holyoke water, he still feels muzzy, dense, exhausted. He locates fresh clothes in one of the dressers, heavy khaki pants and a linen shirt that looks like something only the most jingoistic of tourists would consider fashionable. He makes a mental note to have Emma take away Jagiri's cred chip, if they even use cred chips around here. Jagiri is abusing his power. Jagiri's fashion sense has decided to use his talents for evil. This much is clear.

Downstairs, he makes a lunch of cold cereal, a can of peanuts, a pot of coffee, and finds a note on the table from Emma inviting him up to the manor house whenever he decided to drag his lazy carcass out of bed. He wonders why she didn't just wake him when she was here, and why it does not freak him out that someone had been rattling around the guest cottage while he was upstairs, unconscious, without having locked the door to his room. Wonders if he would be any more freaked out if that person had not been Emma, and why a distinction would exist in the first place.

These are things he should have thought about before, that he hasn't allowed himself to consider adequately. Because on *Paraclete*, he was too busy trying to implicate her brother in a murder, too busy just experiencing her, fascinating himself with the curious and unique patterns of her newness. Exploring her with a bizarre sense of *déjà vu* that he still does not properly understand.

And now, his head is too full of other thoughts supplied by Thomas Malcolm and Townshend Wright and Colonel Ritchie. Concepts that struggle mightily to shake the foundations of everything he has thought he knew.

Last night, after he'd come home, he burned a couple of hours around midnight scaling the Port Authority net for updates on the salvage operation. There was nothing new. EED hadn't recovered the data core yet, or if they had, they hadn't dumped it anywhere on the network for detailed analysis. He doubts that they will. Amah wouldn't have promised him there would be no proof of Frederick's savagery if she couldn't make good on it. It wouldn't even do him any good to raise hell with Colonel Ritchie about it, because the data belongs to PA, even if the hardware is EED. Ritchie had taken the time to send him an encrypted personal message explaining as much. That he'd do what he could, pull some strings, but he was really as much at the mercy of the Port Authority's political apparatus as Ray was. It's one of those ancient and hoary cooperative treaty deals, something that must have made perfect sense at the time it was signed, when powers and responsibilities were being divided in such a way as to give all sides the illusion that they had a thumb in all possible pies without trying to look like anyone was keeping any pies all to themselves.

And Ray got the distinct impression that he wasn't interested in trying very hard, that he would prefer to save the egregious throwing of his weight around for opportunities that more directly benefited the EED.

Ray doesn't care. The lost case file he and Rodriguez and Kilgore had constructed would have been nice, but he doesn't need it anymore. No one is going to prosecute Frederick Whiston. Amah was right about that, too.

And murdering Micah Uytdehaage was the least of his sins.

Just one of thousands, tens of thousands.

Certainly, the other crimes weren't as intimate, as personal as troweling out the viscera of the victim with your own two hands, but Frederick was just as responsible for the many as for the one. Collusion made him responsible, even if he hadn't necessarily been the one to pull the trigger.

Those assumptions were predicated on the belief that Frederick Whiston was a Lilaiken agent, or at the very least, a facilitator for the activities of other Lilaiken agents.

That was what he thought he had learned at Bass-Ingersoll TransGalactic Shipping, scrolling through accounts, through a digital ledger: that a packing crate of the size and dimension specified by Jack Holcomb as containing a stolen Solomonian ring and its slumbering *shed*, had been delivered to Whelemat shortly after the destruction of the vessel *Fortitude*.

Which *should* have meant the following:

1. Link: Frederick Whiston to Lilaiken separatists.
2. Lilaiken separatists to the theft of the ring, to the attacks on *Fortitude*, *Gorgon*, *Asp*, *Hegemony*.
3. The method from those ships to *Paraclete*.
4. From *Paraclete* to Micah Uytdehaage.
5. Micah to Frederick.

A nice and perfect circle of reasoning, and in the center, Frederick Whiston, always Frederick, radiating harm like the spokes of a wheel. Neat and tidily packaged.

Except it was only window dressings over shoddy constructions, fabrications based on faulty assumptions. Townshend Wright told him as much, and as deeply and desperately as Ray would like to punch Wright's smugness all the way into the back of his skull, he was too credible to be discounted, and the things he said were too easily verified for him to have lied outright.

But what he asked Ray to do was unthinkable. It was worse than going back to the beginning and starting all over again, because it pulled the heart right out of Ray and Jack Holcomb's operating hypothesis. Remove the Lilaiken element from the chain of events, and everything that had happened since the theft of the artifact ceased to cohere. The pattern vanished, left him with nothing to explain the why of it all.

Except, as Townshend Wright would have it, the Dag Maoudi.

The Dag Maoudi and the *Dao*.

Which meant that there was either more going on than he was aware of...or that there were lies embedded in

his fact set. He could have picked at that thorn all night long and never come any closer to extracting it from his side.

So unless he chooses to just ignore the assessments of everyone he has known on New Holyoke, everyone in a position to have access to reliable knowledge, he must conclude that he knows nothing about *why* any of this has happened. He has no concept of motive, and no suspect pool except Frederick Whiston and the Dag Maoudi, who have taken possession of the ring and the *shed* contained within it.

And in the middle of it is Emma, vessel of the *mhuruk-a*, core of this impenetrable mystery that is the *Dao Maed Vitouri*.

None of which he can prove.

All of which leaves him in a position in which his only option is to go forward, to play this game, to see what might be learned, and...

Just and. Just the open-ended future.

Ray rises from the dining room table, drops his dirty dishes in the sink and makes his way out of the guest cottage, up the slope to the Grange. He gets lost in the art galleries as he tries to pick his way along the route he and Jagiri traced the night of the dinner party, but eventually finds his way to a heavy set of doors that lead to the piazza in the center. He emerges again beneath the early autumn sky, draws himself across the flagstone paths and withering grass, naked to the blind and vacant eyes of the manor house's many windows. He stops at the base of Emma's tower, tries the door, but finds it locked. Beside it is an ancient comm interface, just a speaker and manual command buttons. He presses the transmit toggle and speaks Emma's name.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," she answers almost at once, the poor speaker system translating her voice as a tinny monotone. "I'm on my way down."

He shrugs, waits, digs his hands in his pockets. A few moments later, Emma unlocks the door and steps outside. She is fresh, fragrant, smiling. Her eyes are so clear, they are almost translucent. She takes his hand, lets him kiss her softly in greeting. Only when he pulls away does he realize that she is pale, trembling, that there are the beginnings of bruises beneath her eyes, as though she's been up all night.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"Nothing now. I missed you all morning."

"Are you feeling okay?" How do you say it without making it sound like an insult. "You look tired."

"I haven't been sleeping well. Readjusting to New Holyoke's schedule, I suppose."

"Shipping lag," Ray says, nodding. "I worry about you."

"Part of it is the *Dao*, yes," she says, as if she knows what he's thinking. "It takes some of my energy to prepare for the *mhuruk-a*. And I have so many things to do. Boring and tedious things I won't bother you with, but I'm afraid I won't be very good company today."

"I should let you rest."

Emma shakes her head. "No. I want to be with you. I thought we might make a visit to the mining headquarters today."

Ray isn't particularly interested in spending any more time around Townshend Wright, so he says, "How about we just stay in? There will be plenty of time for me to acquaint myself with Blackheath Grange. What I'd really like to see is the Trust operation, since I've heard so much about it."

Emma laughs. "Of course. I should have thought of that yesterday."

"Yesterday, I wanted you all to myself. Today I'm willing to share you with the other members of your household."

She checks her watch. "Now is as good a time as any. The children should be getting ready for their afternoon hour of free time, so we won't be interrupting their studies."

"Lead the way, darling."

"I'd rather take your arm, thank you. If I lead, you'll probably follow behind leering at my backside, which is certainly not an example we want to be setting."

She knows him entirely too well already.

The Trust wing is much less confusing than the manor house, seemingly constructed along a theme of linearity. The ground floor is classrooms, playrooms, computing centers. The second floor and above are dormitories segregated by age and gender. Ray had expected something akin to the facilities he encountered in basic training: drab, utilitarian, vaguely crumbling and reeking of industrial cleaning agents. Instead, what he encounters is a succession of gaily lit spaces, bright and vibrant and merrily pastel. The teachers and administrative staff he meets are young Dag Maoudi with brilliant smiles, cheery demeanors. Living incarnations of elementary school archetypes.

At liberty, the children of the Trust bustle through the halls like storm cells, heavy wall clouds spawning tornadoes of laughter, of activity, of casual tumbles and feckless destruction. Their shouts and giggles tumble out of doorways with a summer camp liveliness.

It's not like any summer camp Ray has known, though. Their entertainment isn't pine cone crafts and construction paper, and their instruction is a bit more heady than First Aid for Beginners. In the intermediate classrooms, the interactive wall screen still reflects the complex and imponderable Tchin-Yoo Proof Ray didn't encounter until third-year calculus in college. The kids in the computing center aren't playing video games, but designing transportation node simulators and surface-launch low orbital satellite tracking complexes.

Back on the first level, they stop in the center of the main corridor, and Ray says: "I don't know what to say, Emma. If this is what your intermediate kids are doing, what are the advanced student projects? Do they get to pick between solving world hunger and developing plans for peace in the Middle East?"

She pats him gently on the shoulder. "It isn't so bad, Ray. These are exceptional children. We don't give them anything they can't handle."

"Yes, but where are the older kids? I haven't seen anyone over the age of twelve or thirteen."

"They're all out in the community. After we've provided them with sufficient instruction, we place them with various corporate holdings either here in the city or out in the hubs where they can work with experts in their chosen fields of study. Internships, I guess you'd call them. The more responsible ones actually live away

from the manor, manage their own affairs to the extent to which they're capable--with our financial support, of course. When they're ready, we set up long term employment prospects for them, and they leave the Trust behind for good."

"Do they ever leave New Holyoke, too?"

Emma turns to him, frowning. "They could, I suppose. I'm not aware of such a thing happening, at least not in my lifetime. We don't really track the Trust children, though."

"But they could leave if they wanted to. I mean, you don't have them sign some sort of lifetime agreement to serve the colony in return for all the time and money you've invested in their education."

"Of course not. They remain because they like it here, Ray. For many of them, the Trust is the only family they've known and New Holyoke is the only home they've ever embraced." She continues to look at him, her brown furrowed. "Why would you think anything else?"

"It's just curiosity. These kids could go anywhere in the universe and make a decent living with the skills you're teaching them. I find it odd that they stay."

"In such a backwater, you mean?"

"Well, yes."

"It isn't 'staying'. It's building. And yes, that's something we teach them. It's a value that we inculcate from the very start, that there is something glorious and worthwhile in taking the raw materials of a new world and making them fit for human habitation. We like it here, Ray. The children like it. There's a freedom and scope of possibility--a hope for the future--inherent in the frontier that can't be acquired on the core worlds. There, everything is rigid, social roles are defined, progress is linear because there is a weight of history bearing down on innovation and creativity. Here, we're all free to make our own ways, to travel different roads than the ones traveled by those who have gone before us. That means we'll make our share of mistakes, and some of them will be disastrous, but the things that work will be new in human experience. The legacy each of us leaves the New Holyoke that will come is unique, special, wondrous. Most people can only dream of the opportunities available to every citizen of this world."

He has a response to that, to her glowing idealism. Something about self-determinism that seems to apply to everyone except the Whistons themselves. Something about the curious dissonance between theory and practice. But as he's about to embark on it, he is caught up in a maelstrom of midget limbs and pre-pubescent shouts. A football spirals a few centimeters above his head. He dodges, ducks, crashes into a dozen small bodies would have otherwise streamed around him like an army of ants. One of the children sprawls at his feet as the whooping congregation scurries past.

Ray offers the boy a hand up, apologizing. Then, "Hey, hey! Mr. John Robert Rose!"

The kid from *Paraclete*, expert in all things Captain Shadow. He stares at Ray from the ground, spread-eagled, looking dazed. "Why did you have to get in my way?"

"Sorry, buddy. I didn't see you."

John Robert levers himself into a sitting position, crosses his legs, begins a detailed survey of his extremities. He jabs his elbow at Ray. He's got a serious case of carpet rash, just beginning to bleed. "You hurt me."

"Ouch!" *Just rub some dirt on it.*

He doesn't say it, doesn't tell the kid to buck up and deal with it, because John Robert is staring at him with that eight year old mix of fascination and accusation, that you-broke-it-you-bought-it intensity that will very shortly turn to tears.

Ray hunkers down beside him, examining the elbow with the solemn attention it deserves. "Well, that's a pretty serious scuff, isn't it? Maybe we should get you to the nurse's station or something. What do you say?"

"I just need to put some water on it. Can you take me to the bathroom?"

"Sure."

Ray scoops him up, holding body and violated elbow against his chest, thinking this is probably more of a spectacle than this particular medical emergency deserves, but more than a small part of it is for Emma, because this is the type of behavior women expect nice men to exhibit around children they've just knocked down. He grins at her, shrugs.

"We're going to wander down to the end of the hall for a bit. I'll be right back."

Emma points the opposite direction. "There's a first aid station down there."

"It's okay. This isn't anything we can't handle. No reason to get the medical staff all excited."

Ray and John Robert swing away, bouncing down the corridor. Ray is doing everything he can to keep the boy from bursting into tears, because even this pseudo-parental action is severely taxing his mental database of appropriate treatment of strange children. They push through the bathroom door and Ray sets John Robert on the counter next to the sink. He turns on the water, playing with the temperature until it's comfortable to the touch, then assembles a paper towel compress.

John Robert holds the towels in place, not speaking, just watching Ray.

"So how are they treating you, guy?" Ray says.

"It's okay."

"Feeding you well enough?"

"Yes."

"Making friends?"

"Some."

Ray puffs out his cheeks, scrambling for more topics. He comes up blank. "That's good. Hey, let's take a look at that elbow, okay?"

But John Robert pulls away from him. "I think it's still bleeding."

"It wasn't really bleeding in the first place."

The boy just nods, watching him with those big, dark eyes. He says, "Are you a policeman, Mr. Marlowe?"

Ray lifts his head, stunned and questioning. Then he remembers that the last time John Robert saw him was

on *Paraclete* in full Marine mode. Toting a rifle and rescuing the Whiston household. Shooting it out with Ziggy in the corridor. It's a logical enough assumption for a child to make.

"I guess I'm sort of a policeman, yeah."

"A soldier," the boy says, serious and probing.

"That's closer to the truth. I'm one of the good guys."

"Soldiers always think they're one of the good guys. If they didn't, there wouldn't be any wars."

"You're a pretty smart kid." He resists the urge to tousle Mr. John Robert Rose's hair. It occurs to him that this would be considered some breach of childhood etiquette.

John Robert looks away, toward the bathroom door. "You didn't hurt my arm. I did it this morning, wrestling with Pete Sklenicka in our room. He's ten."

Ray just nods. "You're wondering what happened on the ship, aren't you? I imagine nobody has taken the time to explain things to you. It's okay. Most of us are still trying to figure it out, too."

But the boy wrinkles his nose, angry. "I don't like it here, Mr. Marlowe."

"I know, J.R. It's a strange place. Strange people. It's going to take some time, but you'll get used to it."

"I'm not homesick. The orphanage on Orduvai sucked. They fed us protein paste for every meal. There were rats in the bathrooms. I mean it *sucked*. I'd never want to go back there."

"Okay."

John Robert faces him. He is solemn, peering at Ray through eyelids pinched almost closed. There's something furtive about the expression. Suspicious and intense and terrified. "I hate it here. They seem nice. They treat us well. Sometimes, I even think they care about us, but they aren't what they seem to be, Mr. Marlowe. Our teachers and watchers and guardians. We talk about these things when they think we're asleep, after they've locked the doors and turned on the security system. The other kids, the ones who have been here for months or years, they say that the alarms aren't to keep strangers out, but to make sure that none of us escape."

"I'm sure they're just teasing you. Because you're the new guy, you know? They always give the new kid some grief."

Except Ray can't help but remember how safe the Trust kept Micah Uytdehaage.

And what was it that Thomas Malcolm had said? *I think the Trust and the Whistons have an alarming tendency to lose kids to accidents.*

"I thought so at first, too. This isn't the first time I've been the new kid. I know what it's like. But I don't sleep very well in strange places. I have bad dreams sometimes, so I stay up late, long after the others have gone to bed. And at night, the teachers rise. About an hour, I think, after the last of the lights have gone out in the main house. They rise, and you can hear them padding down the halls, opening doors. They take kids with them, the others say. Sometimes you can hear a sound, like a kid makes when he's awakened from sleep. A small cry, and then they go away. And in the morning, someone is always missing. Usually the slower kids, the ones who aren't keeping up with their studies, who aren't as smart as the rest of us. They're just gone, and

the older boys have told us never to ask where they went, that if we do ask, we'll just be told that they've been placed in a remedial school until they can catch up, but they never do. They never come back.

"And the older boys say that those who do ask end up being the next to go missing."

I think the Trust and the Whistons have an alarming tendency to lose kids to accidents.

Ray takes a breath, an inhalation that sounds to him like a gasp. "Are you sure?"

"They say it only gets bad, it's only every night during this time of the year, when the teachers are preparing for the festival. The rest of the time, we're safe. Mostly safe. That's why they brought us here. The Trust brings in new students just before the festival, to replace the ones they're going to take away. The older kids say we don't have much to worry about if we keep up with our studies. They prefer to take the old ones, the teens who aren't here any longer, who they say have gone off to work for other people and learn trades that will help the colony. It's easier to hide when they go missing." John Robert is quiet for a time, chews his lip. "Get me out of here, Mr. Marlowe. Please. I don't like it. I think they kill kids here just like what happened to Micah. I don't want to be the next one."

The bathroom door springs open then, and a Dag Maoudi teacher enters. A young man, burly and strong, all smiles and sympathy. Emma is behind him, framed in the doorway.

"I hear we had a tumble," the teacher exclaims. "All bandaged up now, eh?"

Ray exchanges a final look with John Robert, but any expression of fear the boy might have shown is hidden behind a mask of childhood suffering, pouting lips, imminent tears.

"Just a scuff," Ray says. "I think we've just about taken care of it."

"Good, good. Let's get you off to class then, John Robert."

The Dag Maoudi takes John Robert's hand and helps him hop down from the counter. Without a wave, even a glance, the boy and teacher make their exit.

This is the worst part: the lying awake, the staring at the ceiling in the dark as he tests scenarios, plugs oddly shaped pieces together to see what might fit where, the surreptitious peeking out of windows and stillness and lights winking out one at a time until he feels like the only man left awake on the planet. All of this compounded by fatigue, because even though he slept late this morning, his body is still whining about the sleep deficit he's racked up over the last four or five days. It's hard to muster the energy to think about things, let alone consider doing things. He feels heavy and dense and stupid, like his skin has been stuffed with sawdust.

He watches the last window at the Grange go dark, a nondescript third floor window. He checks his watch, twiddles his thumbs for the hour John Robert advised him to wait. It is an interminable period, and he has to put himself through a battery of calisthenics just to keep himself awake.

At the end, he slips out the door, down the stairs, away from the cottage. He winds his way up the slope from cottage to Grange, keeping clear of the path and its lighted walkways. He creeps to the back door, pauses to investigate the lintel and jambs. John Robert mentioned the security system for the Trust wing, how he suspected that it was designed to keep the children in rather than predators out. There might be something to that, because Ray finds no security on this door. Not cameras, not proximity sensors, not anything. Even the

aged lock shows no sign of recent use, and it most certainly is not locked now.

Inside, the house is silent except for the quiet thrum of the environmental controls. Cool air wafts from vents he can't see. There is a faint odor of must, of age, of wood polish. He has no sure idea of where to begin, but he took care this afternoon following the visit to the Trust wing, to note the main staircases, to pay close attention to those that seemed to descend from the ground floor. Ones that might lead to cellars or sub-basements. There was one that Emma pointed out specifically, back toward the kitchen, a disused passage that she said led to the Whiston comm hub. She thought he should be aware of it in case he found it necessary to check in with his Terran superiors.

He finds it with little trouble, using the dim lights in the halls for guidance, sticking to the middle of the corridors so his footfalls are muffled by the carpet runners. He pauses every few meters to listen for sounds that would indicate someone following him, or someone ahead around the next corner, but the house is devoid of human sound. It would be easy to mistake it for abandoned space. He doesn't like that thought, the idea of being alone in the Grange.

He goes past the kitchen entrance, peers in on industrial refrigeration units, yawning pantries, ovens large enough for Gretel to bake a dozen witches at once. At the end of this hall is a staircase, narrow and creaking, a servants' passage. Below the steps, crammed into a shadowed nook, is a door hanging slightly ajar. He opens it, sticks his head inside and finds another flight of stairs. They are steep, pitched at a neck-breaking angle, crowded in by bare plaster walls. He takes the steps one at a time, walking on the tips of his toes, keeping to the edges in case they creak. At the bottom is another passage, a dogleg landing and another flight of stairs just like the one he has descended. Ray follows the passage a short way to the first door, peeks inside the crowded comm hub, then ducks out again.

Stairs again, carefully, quietly. At the next landing, the plaster walls give way to bare stone and mortar. A pair of lanterns cast an unsteady yellow glow. It's damp here, punching into bedrock, down below the water table. In places, water has eaten through the mortar and greenish, algae-ridden rivulets stream down the surface of the rock. The air is chilled, tastes of rot and age, oily like a miasma of tuberculosis. Down and down, wooden stairs become carved stone steps that sag in the center from the passage of countless feet.

And then there are no more steps, just a long corridor of flat, meticulously joined stones and evenly spaced lanterns. He waits for a moment, catching his breath, letting the muscles in his legs unclench from so much creeping. Above the sound of his own breathing, he can hear a murmur of voices. Just noise, a grumble of consonants and undifferentiated syllables. A great host of voices.

Ray realizes that he doesn't have his gun. He left it in its harness, in the wardrobe. It's too late to go back for it.

So he moves forward, still stealthy, balancing on the balls of his feet to minimize the slap and echo of his approach against the naked stone. At the end of the hall is another passage to the right, a brief chute to a rounded doorway like the vault of a subterranean lava flume. He becomes aware that the voices he has heard, but not understood, are speaking in a strange tongue. A guttural language, harsh and terse and taciturn in its pronunciation. He edges nearer, crouches low and presses his body against the wall.

At the lip of the chamber, he stops. He watches. He does not dare to breathe.

Here are the Dag Maoudi, dozens of them, young and old, teachers and servants, more than Ray had ever imagined. The room is small, unevenly cut to give the illusion of craggy walls and tormented stone, like an evacuated lava dome. The rock is black, volcanic, faintly shimmering like polished ebony. Around the edges are pits of fire that smoke and spit hot red sparks as though the wood was damp. The scent of their burning is pungent, exotic, aromatic in a way that reminds Ray of the Thai jungle. An equatorial smell.

In the center of the room is a square platform of hewn rock, rectangular slabs laid side by side. At the corners are four pillars pitted and scoured by age and weather, and in the center is another stone, dark and brooding, ancient in appearance. The firelight flickers against it, illuminating strange glyphs, hints of writing, loops and swirls gouged into the surface. Ray has seen these before, imperfect reproductions scrawled into the living flesh of the Dag Maoudi. The stele itself is ringed about with circles, concentric patterns, wheels within wheels.

The Dag Maoudi gather at the fringes of the platform, their backs to the chamber's entrance, hunkered down. The men wear merkins of tanned animal skin, the women loincloths of the same material. Their flesh glistens with sweat from the heat of the flames, and they seem to lean forward, focused on the platform, lost in ritual or reverie.

Because on the stage before them are three young men, pale and languorous, their heads sagging to the side, their eyes drooping. Two of them lounge against the corner pillars, all but asleep. The third stands in the foreground, leaning heavily against the shaft of a wooden spear. They are naked except for the merkins.

Amah rises from the front of the row of the gathering. She takes a place off to the side, straightens her broad and powerful shoulders, her pendulous breasts hanging against her belly. She lifts her face toward the apex of the vault, and cries out in a loud voice.

"En ditoshe garat hui?"

The boys on the platform, clutching their spears, jump at the sudden noise, momentarily shocked from their stupor.

The Dag Maoudi respond with one voice: "En ditoshe garat hui?"

Amah nods at them, speaks again: "Who needs to be chieftain?"

"Cho-yu! Cho-yu!"

"Blessed are we, the Dag Maoudi, the children of gods, the bearers of life, the seed of mighty Goru Da."

"Blessed."

"Blessed are we at this time, the fortunate and faithful, the keepers of the Dao Maed Vitouri."

"Blessed."

"Blessed is the sacrifice. Blessed is the blood."

"Blessed is. Blessed is."

"Blessed is the *mhuruk-a* who makes our enemies tremble."

"Blessed is the *mhuruk-a*."

"And Blessed are the ones who serve. Blessed is the vessel."

"Blessed are the ones who rise."

"Who needs to be chieftain?"

"En ditoshe garat hui?"

Amah presses her hands together, bows her head before them. From the back of the chamber, a lone figure rises. Dark, familiar. Ray clamps his mouth shut so he will not make a sound.

Jagiri Oh-Kar.

He makes his way toward the platform, and the Dag Maoudi part like a sea wave broken by the prow of a mighty ship. Jagiri bears no expression but concentration, a ritualized intensity that is fierce and savage and withering.

He approaches the young man at the front of the platform, and stops. In his hands are a clutch of strange weeds, stalks like dragon grass, and a narrow clay pot like a wine flagon.

"Cho-yu! Cho-yu! Hsst," he says.

The Trust orphan blinks at him, bewildered. He sways on his feet as though he's on the verge of falling over.

"Hotu ome kakisoma tot chichode."

Jagiri speaks and grins, showing wide white teeth. He kneels before the young man and places the pot and weeds at his feet like an offering.

"En ditoshe garat hui?" Then, disturbed, he says. "Getocka mui. Dodope."

The Dag Maoudi hear and laugh, a bitter and spiteful echo.

But it is Jagiri who smiles. From the hands of the young man, he takes the spear, turns to the side, strikes a pose as if he's about to hurl it across the length of the chamber.

Instead, with a spring and a roar, he lunges with the spear, drives it through the young man's torso. In the near silence, Ray hears the boy gasp, a howling intake of breath, a grunt of dimly perceived agony. His eyes bulge, his mouth drops open. Jagiri bares his teeth and wrenches the spear free, lets him fall.

Jagiri leaps free, brandishes the spear like a bayonet, plunges across the platform to another of the young men, and impales him against pillar where he leans. Then the third. None of them cry out, none of them move to fight back or flee. They stare and wait and ponder the doom the Dag Maoudi have staged for them.

And at the end, Jagiri Oh-Kar throws his arms above his head, grips the spear and cries out: "Kapikome tabu hatudime sharundae!"

The Dag Maoudi rise and answer his call with a thunderous shout. "Kapikome tabu hatudime sharundae!"

They leap and clap their hands, surge toward the platform and the bodies of the young men they have just murdered. Ray can't see what it is that they're doing because of the press of bodies, but there are flashes like knives, and there are great clay bowls passed from hand to hand, a fire brigade of crimson stained buckets. The bowls slowly gravitate from the center of activity, from the dazzling knives, to the edge, to the platform's focus, where Amah stands in great dignity beside the ancient stele. She receives the offerings of blood, lifts them high and pours the contents of the bowl over the stone. The crimson stain streaks the sides, traces curious patterns around circles and rings, glyphs and characters.

And with each bowl, the Dag Maoudi raise up a ragged and celebratory cheer.

And with each bowl, Amah says, "We bid thee rise, mighty mother. Blessed is the *mhuruk-a*. We welcome the coming of the *Dao Maed Vitouri*. We invite you to share the glorious vessel. Whisper to us words of Wisdom as you have always done. Teach us to rise, to beat our enemies to dust, for our sacrifices are worthy."

The blood runs from stele to shallow pools culled in the rock. One by one, the Dag Maoudi kneel and press their hands into the pools. They touch their faces and arms, their chests and thighs; they cover themselves with the blood of their victims.

"Teach us to rise, to beat our enemies to dust. Blessed is the *mhuruk-a*! Welcome is the coming of the *Dao*!"

Their voices are a din and clamor, a savagery of ecstatic voices. It isn't human voices that Ray hears, that pierce his consciousness like lancets, but a roar and a howl that he knows. A frenetic and blistering concussion of sound that spans eons, that bridges impossible distances of hidden space.

Shed, he thinks. *Mhuruk-a*.

It emerges from the stone, a flickering and insubstantial shadow of being, more suggestion than form, a wisp of power like dissipating smoke.

The Dag Maoudi clamor ceases. They drop to their knees, heads bowed. All but Amah, who lifts her face to the *mhuruk-a* as a priestess in her own temple.

"We bid you rise," she says. "Rise and take the vessel. Welcome is the coming of the *Dao*."

The *shed* contemplates her, grave and weary. *I am weak, and I hunger.*

"Bless us, and you will be filled. The way has been made, but for now, you must abide. You must celebrate the blood and the perfection of the vessel."

I will abide. And in time, I will be filled.

"Blessed is the *mhuruk-a*."

Amah lowers her head, and the *shed* vanishes.

Does not vanish, Ray knows, but trades the stele for the vessel. For Emma. And he realizes that the chamber itself, the distance he has traveled, has wound back beneath the Grange. If he imagined the route in cross section, he would find this vault to be directly below Emma's tower. Her circular Faery Turret, a metaphorical stele in which the *mhuruk-a* might be contained, might reside.

Finally, Ray recoils, unable to bear any more. He withdraws shuddering and nauseous, ready to vomit. Needing to expel this darkness. Desperate to escape the things he has seen.

In horror, with the echo of the Dag Maoudi still in his ears, he flees back the way he came. Down the corridor, up the flight of stone steps, taking them two at a time. He's less concerned about not being heard than about just putting space between himself and chamber. Ascending to wooden stairs and plaster walls, banging into the passage with the comm hub. Up and up, to the kitchen, the house itself, slicing through passages and corridors he hardly recognizes.

And eventually he finds himself in the main hall, completely disoriented, nearer the front doors than the back. A sweeping marble staircase arches toward the second floor to his left. To his right is the entry foyer, shimmering with light.

He stops, gathers himself. Tries to steady his jangled nerves.

From the corner of his eye, he detects movement on the second floor landing. Ray jerks aside, ready to dash, ready to break someone's spine. Ready to do something other than experience his own helplessness.

Frederick Whiston, dark and sour, rumped in his evening jacket, frowns down at him. "Have you seen enough then, Mr. Marlowe? Have you had your fill of surprise?"

"Get the fuck away from me," Ray says, snarling. Killing Frederick would go a long way toward satisfying his rage at this moment. It's not a temptation he could endure for long. "You're no better than they are, and we both know it."

"Well, I'd hardly argue with you over that point. The question is, what are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to get Emma out of this place, and then I'm going to make you pay. Every fucking one of you."

Frederick answers his contempt with a mournful shake of his head. "That fascinates me. Here you have just observed the faithful servants of this household and this family murdering three innocents...it was three, wasn't it? They like to re-enact that escape of Goru Da the night before the *Dao*. No matter! My point being that you have just witnessed this terrible crime, and your first impulse is to rescue my lovely sister rather than leap about seeking justice for the victims." Frederick holds up a hand to keep Ray from responding. "I know, who would believe such a thing? To whom would you appeal? You don't need to defend yourself to me. I know perfectly well what you're thinking. It's just curious, that's all. A bookend reaction to the one aboard *Paraclete*. How many people *would* you be willing to sacrifice to have Emma all to yourself, Marlowe? Ask yourself that question, and the number had better start pretty high, because by my count, you're already well over twelve thousand. I don't believe even Paris loved Helen so much as to make that grave a sacrifice."

Ray has no answer for him. He can't explain lunacy to a madman. He tosses a final curse at Frederick Whiston, then turns away. Through the foyer, out the front door, around the house to the cottage where he began.

He's done. He's angry and impotent and exhausted. The galaxy is not big enough to contain his outrage at the things he has seen, or at the things he has been made to understand. He strips off his clothes and falls into bed, glaring into the night, glaring into himself.

Somewhere in there, between staring into the physical darkness and the muddled darkness of his experiences, Ray tumbles down the slope of sleep.

And it's still dark. Warm dark, not New Holyoke autumn, but oily, sweaty, tropical darkness. He smells trees and damp soil, fruit rot and sharp ocean tang. The odor of malaria, pungent. The night is filled with sound. The scuttling of small feet through the underbrush, the whirl of insects whose wings are the size of his palm, whose thick bodies are pulpy, liquid. Distant, the sound of surf crashing against cliffs, burbling up soft sanded beaches. A crash of thunder, scent of monsoon rain. Nearer, voices mutter, fire flickers. Shouting.

Who is he?

He is cartilage and teeth, dorsal finned, shark-toothed. He is black, moonlit eyes and sealskin flesh. He is tamping heart and suckling, ravenous maw. He is, and he is, and he is...none of that and all of it. Form and verisimilitude. And motionlessness. He is Watcher, Keeper, Vision, One. Fascinated by stone.

Stone.

Tall, as tall as a man, a plinth, black as the night, volcanic rock polished and formed, rounded and chiseled, ringed in circles. Concentric circles. Ring within ring, and characters. Slashes etched in rock, messages, hieroglyphs both delicate and savage at once. Carved with violence, point and angle and line.

But mostly circle and ring, circle and ring, spinning like a gyre. He looks away.

Hush. This is a secret most grave, that he can look away. To teach is to learn; to observe is to learn; to commune is to learn. And to teach, to urge.

The rest is waiting.

Waiting, waiting, waiting, which is a little thing until the last, when moments stretch into eons, and the light of stars ages between heartbeats.

Cho-yu! Cho-yu! Hsst. Whisper and stealth. The young men, flint spears leaning against shoulders, sleepy, worn, muzzied by *kesh* root, chewed and spat. Three of them. They hear the call, the pad of bare feet on mud, dark form emerging from the shadows between thatched huts. Not spindly, not root ravaged and belly starved, but strong, whole, hale.

Goru Da, prince, chief in waiting. Except, except...cowardice. Rejected by the father. Weak willed. Does not hunt, does not fight, does not raise his hand except to stroke the flesh of women. But stealthy, clever.

Listen:

He is all smiles, teeth as wide as gates, reflected in the light from the fire pits beside where the young men sit. He hails them again, *cho-yu!* And he has jugs and *kesh*, and what is this? Disgrace does not mean enmity. *Hotu ome kakisoma tot chichode.* I have known you since we were this tall. We are one.

En ditoshe garat hui? Who needs to be chieftain? What threat can the Ma'huru bring now that these others, these pale men have come from across the water? The Ma'huru are gone, washed away like sand in the tide, scattered like trees before the wind. We should celebrate; we should drink. There is nothing more to fear.

And they relax, sit back down, drink. And drink. And Goru Da does not drink, but laughs, quietly, stealthily. And says to them: My father says that I am weak, that Totu Chicho will be a better chief, but what does he know? I use my mind. I think. But I still am strong armed. I have skill with a spear! Better than any other man in the village. Give me your spear and I will demonstrate. It is a reasonable request. Give me your spear.

One does; one so drunk he should keep his spear, just to lean on, just to keep from falling over. Goru Da, prince, takes the spear. Long shaft and flint blade, glimmering in the light.

Look, the three of you, look. See that tree? None of you can hit that tree from here. It is too far, and too small, but I can hit it.

They laugh at him. The tree is wide and fat, only a few dozen paces away.

You are drunk, they tell him. The youngest warrior, a mere child, could hit that mark. That is no feat.

Goru Da frowns, becomes angry. *Getocka mui. Dodope.* You shame me. Liars.

Show me you can strike it first, and when you miss, I will shame you with my skill.

They laugh at him again, but he goads them, and the two who still have their spears rise. They stand beside him, wobbling, peering into the night. Arms back, bodies coiled, surge and release. The spears fly straight and true, bury their points into the trunk.

They look to Goru Da. *Cha? See?*

But it is they who see. Goru Da, grinning, jerking the shaft of his spear from the body of their brother. Grinning, turning, lunge and punch, lunge and punch. Blood. Only Goru Da remains.

Kapikome tabu hatudime sharundae.

Let us go to a new world, you and I.

Yes, yes.

And Goru Da whistles, a sound like a bird. Shuttered lanterns, tall men. He kicks the gourds, still heavy with wine, into the fire pits. The flames hiss, and there is smoke, and the scent of burning.

And still the smoke, the scent of burning, the flicker of firelight. And heat. Roar.

He opens his eyes, reorients to a body that seems shrunken, dense, somehow not his own.

A tongue of flame laps up the drapery covering his window. He can feel its warmth, dry and scorching. He can taste charred wood on his tongue. For some time, seconds, he's bewildered, staring at a mirage, at some bizarre dreamscape, then he blinks to clear his vision. But there is no clearing. It is darkness and smoke, rippling orange disaster chasing itself up the walls. Where there is no flame, there is only a roil of black perception, the warped substance of reality.

Ray breathes, chokes. Time to move.

He thinks like a soldier, old patterns that feel rusty. Someone is trying to kill him. What does he need? Clothes, and the ones from yesterday are in a pile on the floor beside the bed. He finds them by touch where he left them. Ray kicks his legs into his trousers, grabs his boots, just as the bedroom door--what he assumes to be the door given his sense of the room's geography--explodes in a shower of wood and flaming splinters. The fire from the hall races into his bedroom, red at the tip, blue and green iridescence at the base. It darts along the carpet as though it's chasing him, seeking him out. Chasing a trail of accelerant.

Ray springs out of bed. More smoke boiling in from the hall; it occludes even the flame tattering the curtains. He sucks in a breath that is mostly smoke, that tastes like brimstone on his tongue. His body tells him to gasp, to gag, to clear his lungs. Get out.

In a minute. Just give it a minute!

Step, step. Head down and eyes squeezed to slits, but the smoke and heat are invasive. They sting his pupils; his eyes water, so that he feels like he's crying, mourning a loss he doesn't understand. Arms out in front, reaching, reaching. His fingers touch the smooth side of the wardrobe. It radiates heat. The lacquered veneer has begun to crack and bubble, curling up from the frame like desiccated skin. Inside, on the floor, his load harness, cool straps and comforting weight. He feels that, even if his other senses have been taken away; the comforting weight of his pistol swinging in its holster at the bottom of the loop, as irrevocable as a pendulum. But there's more, and he has to scrounge for it, back in the recesses of the cabinet, where he hid it from

anyone who might come looking for such a thing, the enclosed cube of Nomar's secure storage compartment containing ring and *shed*, sprouting sensor wires from the top like snakes from the head of Medusa.

Then it's just following the burning tendril to the window, trying not to boil, imagining that the fire has had a good head start downstairs. Everything below him is a shimmering ember, living and breathing flame. That would be his luck, to dick around, make it to the window just in time for the floor to give way and plunge him into a pit of perfect grilling charcoal.

Still, he's careful. He doesn't throw himself through the glass on the prayer that he won't plunge badly, land wrong, break his arms or legs or neck. He expects someone to be out there, waiting for him. Daring him to survive this.

He lifts the window casement open. Bits of flaming cloth from the drapes drift down on him, extinguish on his shoulders. But the window is open, and for just an instant, he feels the cool night air on his skin, takes half a breath, sites and measures his surroundings. But smoke likes fresh air, too. The cloud of darkness shrieks behind him, surges forward and around, shoves through the opening.

Harness over his shoulder, boots clenched between his teeth, Ray leans out and takes hold of the tree branch nearest to him from the great oak that scratches at the walls like rats all night long. It's thick, as wide around as his thigh. He scrambles out the window and into the screen of foliage, then deeper in until he's got his arms wrapped around the trunk. Where he can breathe again, where he can squeeze his eyes together until his tears wash the sting and smoke away.

Then it's down and down, plodding through a dense array of limbs and branches, climbing in the dark, or unclimbing, he supposes. Something he hasn't done since he was a kid, and even then he never unclimbed a tree unless there was a full moon to light his way.

But eventually, after an eternity of false starts and testing limbs that don't quite bear his weight, after the tree has succumbed in its upper regions to the temptation of fire, he drops the final three meters to the ground. Crouch, duck, scan, sprint. In case whoever it was that decided to burn him out had the foresight to set up on the hill with a rifle and a decent sniper's scope.

Doesn't happen, of course. There's no kick of dirt, no puff of supersonic metal furrowing into the ground at his feet. Because this was an amateur attempt, a bumbling stab at assassination. Any kid with a can of primer and a match can torch somebody's house while they're sleeping. That pisses him off more than anything else. It was such a poor effort.

Ray drifts away from the cottage, glances back over his shoulder to see it completely engulfed in flame now. He puts a hundred meters between them, then stops, sits on the ground and puts on his boots. It's only a few moments later that the lights at the manor house begin to flick on, one by one. Shouts out the window, then a low, wailing alarm.

Fire! Fire!

And he watches them come, Dag Maoudi domestics, pale faced Trust children, spilling out of the manor house like anxious ants, dashing toward him, morbid with curiosity. High up on the third floor, there is a balcony, and a pair of french doors. In the doorway is a light, and illuminated there is Juliet Whiston, bound to her chair, lace shawl across her shoulders. She peers at the scene, sees him seated in the grass, waves at him a frail, translucent hand.

Ray waves back.

Behind him, knowing, though he can't see it, the shooting flame and black smoke climb, climb...into the form and figure of an immense being; the image of a *shed* whose trunk is darkness, whose limbs are flame, who lifts his head to the immeasurable sky and howls with laughter, with glee that sounds like devoured lumber, falling stones and the shatter of dreams.

Within minutes, there are firefighting tankers plowing through the gates, flattening the lawn beneath their heavy tire treads and crunching down the pebble paths. Water cannons blast the skeletal remains of the guest cottage, their operators concerned more with containment than salvaging the structure. The open gates beckon the press to follow, and then there are Eyelenses fluttering over the scene, colliding with one another like drunken butterflies. Wide angle shots of the blaze; zooms on Ray, on individual firemen. When they come within reach, Ray snaps out his hand, plucks them out of the air like dandelions from a summer lawn, and grinds them beneath his heel. And like dandelions, no matter how many he crushes, there are always more.

The camera operators, at least, are keen enough to steer clear of him. They keep their compads and recording devices out of his face.

Floodlights directed from the house wash the lawn in a sterile, white glare. Long shadows, thin and angular, pace the grass. The residents of the Whiston household stand in clumps, milling about, shaking their heads. It's mostly just gawking now--a carnival of activity and shouts and humming machinery.

Ray just watches, standing apart, lips drawn into a tight, pale line. In the shadows cast by a grand oak, well off the trodden path, Emma clings to him, still in her satin nightgown, standing in bare feet. She shivers and presses her head against his chest despite the fact that he is covered in sweat and black ash and grime. He places an arm around her shoulder.

"You could have been killed," she says. Not scared for him, but angry.

"I wasn't," he responds. But only because it was a poor attempt. Because whoever wanted him dead was a coward.

A coward who wanted to kill him for the things he has seen.

But Emma doesn't need to hear that; she needs only the reminder that he escaped. A few scant minutes ago, before the circus began, she had come running down the path, the crest of the Whiston extended family wave, her mouth open as if she would scream, hands splayed, panic in her eyes. She stopped near him, but he was invisible in the dark where he stood, well off the path and its sniper friendly marker lights. He spoke her name over the clamor of voices, of shouts charging in behind her, and somehow she heard him. Leapt at him, smothered him, hasn't released him since.

"What happened?" she asks.

"That's what I would like to know."

Ray recognizes the voice at once, so he doesn't bother to turn around.

"I assume you're going to ask me to write my equipment loan off to you as a loss, Commander." Colonel Ritchie stands at his shoulder, watching the flames gutter. He looks as though he dressed almost as hastily as Ray did. Out of uniform, shirt untucked, hair bristling.

"News travels fast," Ray answers.

"Just being conscientious in my duty to serve the citizens of New Holyoke." Ritchie sounds grim, almost as angry as Emma. "But you haven't answered the lady's question."

"Someone tried to kill me."

"Someone."

"It certainly wasn't an accident. Whoever it was used a powerful accelerant to get things moving quickly. Just before I made it out, I could see from the color of the flame that it was tracking some chemical trail as it spread. I'd guess dotopylene."

Clumsy, yet anonymous. Not a traditional fire-bombing caliber accelerant, because it is older, slower burning than cutting edge terrorist materials. Dotopylene is also ubiquitous on colony worlds, a diesel fuel surrogate that can be manufactured at small cost in standard laboratories in far flung places where shipping fuel becomes cost-prohibitive and the raw materials for traditional fossil fuels don't exist.

"You're thinking Lilaikens? Seems somewhat low-tech for intergalactic terrorists."

They've had this conversation, and Ritchie is mocking him, though he has the good graces not to grin and roll his eyes.

"No."

Ritchie lifts his eyebrows, surprised. "No?"

"It was Frederick Whiston." He doesn't elaborate. Nothing he could say to the EED Colonel would be believed, and if it was believed, nothing could be proved. Best to just let the accusation stand.

Ritchie is silent for a long time, like he's been punched in the gut, been left as breathless as a corpse. But he recovers quickly enough, grins in that sour and aggravated way the military teaches lieutenants to do it in Officer Candidate School. The grin of a man who suspects he has just become the pivot man in a circle jerk and is going to have to make the best of his promotion.

He says: "Well, at least you're keeping an open mind about it."

"Ray?" Emma, stunned, imagining she has heard him wrong. If he was wearing a shirt, she'd probably have balled her fists in it.

He ignores her for now. "Are you going to be investigating this case, Colonel?"

"Arson? God, no. There are local authorities in place for that sort of thing."

"What about the attempted murder?"

"When the fire investigator determines whether or not it was, in fact, arson, it'll be turned over to Security."

Ray shrugs. It was what he expected. "Then it really doesn't matter who did it."

An Eyelens flutters near, pauses for a shot of Ritchie and Ray standing together, telescopes on Emma looking tragic and demure in her nightgown. Ritchie waits for it to pass on.

"Would you care to explain that indictment of our legal apparatus, Commander, for my personal illumination

if for nothing else?"

"Frederick Whiston tried to kill me. No one on New Holyoke associated with the colonial government is going to do anything about it. I consider the fact that you even ask me to explain it insulting, Colonel."

"Ray?" Emma again, plaintive.

"I don't mean to be insulting, but it should be sufficiently clear to you in this environment and this political situation that no one is going to jump on your bandwagon just because you make the claim that he tried to whack you. Not without some sort of proof," Ritchie says.

"That's why I want *you* to arrest him."

"Me?"

"You. EED. On charges of murder, attempted murder and conspiracy to commit terrorism and mass death. Something to lock him down for a while until I can get some work done."

Ritchie stiffens, sputtering and livid. "Now hold on--"

Outrage is to be expected. Ray hasn't given him any more reason to believe these things than he did the first time. "You can detain him on those charges, or you can take him into protective custody to keep me from killing him. I don't care what you call it, Colonel, but I want him locked up."

"Ray, no!"

He can't avoid her any longer. Emma tries to wriggle away from him, protesting, but he keeps his arm around her shoulder, a firm grip so she can't escape. This is his fault, an explanation that is long overdue and a less than optimal situation in which to offer it to her. Still, he's feeling more murderous than guilty at the moment. It makes him harsh in a way he can't mitigate, though she is the last person who deserves such things from him.

"Yes, Emma. He murdered Micah. He tried to kill me tonight because I know he did it. And I'm convinced he was involved in the attack on *Paraclete*. I know this, Emma. I investigated him before the attack, remember? We had all the data we needed, and we were going to arrest him the next morning. That may have been why *Paraclete* was destroyed. It's why he tried to kill me again tonight. As long as I don't have any proof, he knows that no one will touch him."

"Bloody hell," Ritchie mutters. It sounds like a groan.

Or was it for another reason entirely? Had Frederick Whiston tried to kill him to protect the Dag Maoudi, the summoning of the *mhuruk-a*, all of the secret things happening in that chamber beneath the manor? Because he knew about them, had told Ray as much. The Dag Maoudi had taught him all about killing children to harness the *shed*. But if that was true, why had he spoken with such clear disdain of the whole process? And what was he doing drunk in the house rather than participating in the ritual in the first place?

Because he was weak. He lacked some critical, essential element that the Dag Maoudi and the Whistons deemed essential. How many times had Ray been told that?

He says, "I'm sorry, Em. I am. I should have told you earlier, before things got this far out of hand. But I had to see, you know? I had to come up with something more concrete than just speculation."

But Emma shakes her head, says nothing. Her entire body tenses, trembles. She's still trying to get away from him. Ray clutches her with both arms, not letting her squirt away, and she batters at him with her small fists. All he can do is let her. Then she sobs, and collapses, and he's no longer holding her from fleeing, but just holding her.

"I'm sorry," he says, quiet, speaking into her hair because she won't look at him.

Beside him, Ritchie curses, then begins digging through pockets. Ray hears him only peripherally as he speaks into his portable comm. *Yes, patch me through to the duty officer. Who is this? Yes, this is Colonel Ritchie, Lieutenant. I need you to contact Sergeant Whitted. Have him gather a detent and transport team and report to the Whiston estate immediately. I know what I just said! Whiston estate, on the double. Tell him to drive the Rhino. I've got media all over the place and would really like to avoid a mob scene if at all possible.*

Ritchie breaks the connection, jams the comm back into his trousers.

"You had better be right about this, Marlowe. There's not enough duct tape and bailing wire in the whole universe to fix the damage between EED and New Holyoke if you're not."

Ray doesn't answer, but he hears, and he feels gratitude. Ritchie is taking an impressive risk.

Emma says, "You should have told me."

Amah told me not to. "It was pointless when I couldn't prove it. But now he's changed the rules of the game. He couldn't leave well enough alone."

"Of course, you can't prove it now, either, I imagine," Ritchie says wearily, like a man who is watching his career collapse. "I can hold him for three days, Marlowe. Three days on your accusation, and purely as a courtesy to your rank. That much is legal, and you've obviously pissed somebody off with the progress you're making in your investigation. That's all I need to hold him on suspicion, though I can tell you now that we're going to pay out the ass for it. My pardon to present company, but the Whiston lawyers are going to eat me alive."

Ray casts a long look at the remains of the cottage, mostly extinguished now. Just a smoking ruin. "When the Port Authority obtains the data core from *Paraclete*, you'll have all the documentation you want."

"And, as I just said, right now I'm just going on your word." His tone, slightly falsetto, suggests that this is the worst possible scenario he can envision.

"Sounds like a good reason for you to make sure PA shares the complete data core structure with you. It could be embarrassing otherwise."

"Do not fuck me on this, Marlowe."

Ritchie can brood and rant all he wants. The point is moot, proven in Ray's mind if not on paper. So he is not surprised when Sergeant Whitted reports within the half hour that Frederick Whiston has apparently fled the scene.

Friday morning. The first day of the *Dao Maed Vitouri*.

Sunlight seeps through the blinds in the room Ray has been given inside the manor house. A room on the

ground floor, buried in the warren of switchbacks and odd hallways, away from the bustle and activity of the household. A quiet place, he has been told, where he can recover from the terrors of the night. More likely, an out of the way place, where he can get lost just trying to find the bathroom and wander the empty corridors and silent rooms until he dies of starvation.

He doesn't lie in bed, despite the fact that he really hasn't slept. He finds fresh clothes outside his door, neatly folded and stacked on top of an otherwise pointless baroque style table. His size, but the style is a bit more flamboyant than he would normally prefer. Shiny, and not enough pockets. In his mind, he can hear Jagiri laughing as she takes them back inside and changes. The thought itself makes him feel ill. Fresh from a night of murdering Trust children in some bizarre Passion Play recreation, Jagiri Oh-Kar still has time and mental clarity to think about procuring a suitable outfit for the Whiston guest. Despite his shower before going to bed and the fresh clothing against his skin, he still smells of smoke. His nostrils are filled with the scent of burning, the way he remembers smelling after weekender Boy Scout camping trips in early summer after two days spent crowded around hissing campfires.

Instead of wandering hallways that all look alike, Ray climbs out the window, circles around the house and enters again through the front door. He makes his way down to the comm hub and calls EED. He isn't surprised to reach Colonel Ritchie, who sounds weary and depressed, and is even less surprised that EED has so far had no luck apprehending Frederick Whiston. A man with Freddy's connections and financial backing on a world as thinly populated as New H would be difficult to track down. Maybe even impossible, though Ritchie has his people scouring the city all the transportation routes. At least as much as the planetside skeleton crew can be said to scour anything.

These failures disturb Ritchie deeply, like personal indictments. But Ray isn't worried. EED has locked down all the shuttles to the Port Authority station and is rigorously scanning all high altitude flights. No one is going to get off planet without a great deal of trouble or a fortunate series of bribes. Which means that Freddy is confined to New Holyoke, and Ray is almost certain he will be back in the city before too long, maybe a matter of days. Freddy is too stupid to believe in anything other than his personal and familial invulnerability, and too self-absorbed and sycophant oriented to survive outside of society for very long.

Ray is content with the inevitability of this scenario. Whether by exile or detention, Freddy is out of his hair, which was all Ray wanted in the first place. He has other demands on his attention at this moment in time.

Afterward, he wanders down to the wreckage of the cottage to poke through the ashes and water sodden remains for anything he might be able to salvage. It's a pointless exercise. The heap of superheated stones and charred timbers still radiates enough heat to hold search attempts at bay, and convince him that nothing of value, none of the EED equipment, remains intact.

And he can't even talk to Emma. He tries. He needs to assure himself that she's okay after the long night, and that she'll be okay as the *Dao* nears. He stomps back up to the house, through the main hall to the entrance to the central piazza, but the tower door is locked. No one answers the buzz of the comm that is affixed to the wall outside the door, so he bangs on it until a Dag Maoudi girl answers and informs him that Emma is sleeping late. She's gathering strength for the ordeal of the *Dao*, a rite spoken of with such reverence and downcast eyeballing that Ray can't avoid the suspicion he's supposed to care about such things. All he wants is to see that she's well.

Because last night he dreamed, and in dreaming, comprehended. Last night he saw, and in seeing, he learned the secret of the *Dao*. He has all the pieces of the puzzle set out on a table before him. It's just a matter of putting them together in interlocking and coherent patterns--just a matter of time before the complete picture emerges.

Briefly, he considers just knocking this girl over and barging up the stairs anyway, but he doesn't. He just

nods and grins like a monkey as she closes the door in his face, locks it again. He hasn't been a real Marine in so long, he's forgotten how to rationalize such things, to simply act in the pursuit of an objective without adequately considering the consequences. He's too much of a spook these days, used to doing everything obliquely. Never ask a direct question when a dozen sidelong queries will get you the same answer without revealing anything about your true objective. It's all so freaking complicated.

Ray is exhausted with complications. Posing as a systems vet on a starship so he can search for Lilaiken infiltrations, only to have them destroy the ship anyway. Chasing after a murder suspect, taking weeks to gather data in widdershins fashion, under deep cover, only to have the suspect escape arrest once, twice, God knows how many times in the future. Convincing Colonel Ritchie that Kilgore and Rodriguez were Lilaiken spies because he's not supposed to talk about the *shed*, only to discover that the stolen Solomonic ring is here, in Frederick's possession. So much of it, maybe all of it, could have been resolved earlier with a little application of old fashioned Marine bluntness. He is not just exhausted by complications, he's been destroyed by them.

It's the old joke. A spook can't even order a decent breakfast after a while, so it goes. The waiter approaches the table and asks something like, *What can I get for you, sir?* A Smith or Jones can't just admit that he wants coffee, because to ask straight out for coffee is to hint that he lacks adequate access to coffee related products at this moment in time. It's an admission of weakness that an entrepreneurial minded waiter could exploit. So he must say something like: *I've heard that the recent mudslides in Columbia have decimated many of the supracorp industrial farms. That must wreak havoc with your supply chain.* To which the astute waiter will respond: *I wouldn't know about that. I don't do the ordering. That would be management's job.* Ah! So we've established that the waiter, the field agent under the direction of the restauranteuring junta, is effectively out of the intelligence loop when it comes to fluctuations in global geo-meteorological or possibly even geo-political status. *But certainly you'd be aware if this type of incident resulted in pricing adjustments? You might notice, say, that your other customer contacts seemed to be less likely to order premium Colombian beverages than they typically might, correct?* Waiter: *Um. If people want coffee, they drink coffee.* Thus, the target to be acquired has actually entered the negotiation. But has the waiter dropped the c-bomb as a form of manipulation, i.e. does he want the agent to order coffee because he is aware that the price has changed, or because he has been instructed to suggest the high desirability and reliability of coffee to his contacts. That the waiter is the one who brought up coffee in the first place suggests that he has acquired an understanding of certain dining and diner profiles. He is savvy. *Some bioscientists have advanced the argument that coffee is bad for the prostate.* In other words, what you're offering is not without risk. I can live without it. It is not a lack per se, so much as a preference. I might just as likely prefer water or juice, so you don't have me at a disadvantage where all I require is coffee and that is a desire you can exploit. Waiter: *Well, yeah. Maybe after years and years. One cup probably is not going to hurt you.* So he wants you to order the coffee, which means he must get something out of the exchange. Maybe just a bigger tip, maybe some arcane sense of satisfaction. But he'll also tag you as a coffee drinker, which means the next time you come in, he won't even have to ask. He'll just bring you coffee. He'll bring it, you'll pay for it, whether you actually felt like coffee or not. You'll be obligated to take it because most of the time you actually do want coffee. It gives him a hold on you.

Complicated means that sometimes you order prune juice when all you want is a cup of joe.

Your lies, their lies, building an edifice of perception, a structure of truth that may have no relation to the reality which it purports to represent. The problem with the oblique approach is that you never know if your data is answers to the questions you asked, or the question they thought you were asking. Meaning devoid of context.

Thomas Malcolm said to him: If you want to know about Juliet Whiston, ask her. She's the only one who knows the truth, and I think she's been waiting a long time to find someone who she can trust with her secrets.

If he wants to understand New H, the Whiston family, whatever mad fear it was that caused Emma to flee in

the first place, Juliet Whiston is the one with the answers. He has seen the *mhuruk-a* peering at him through Emma's eyes, just as it once looked out from Juliet Whiston's.

He understands in part; the rest is fear, stark and vicious.

He's not about to let complications stand in his way.

Ray climbs up the curved staircase from the main hall, scuffing his feet against white marble stairs that shine in sunlight reflected from the windows of a second floor verandah. There is no sound in the house, it seems, just the echo of his steps, his plodding progress. On the third level, he arrives at a landing which branches off left and right into two separate corridors. He pauses, imagines himself in the night, ash grimed and dirty as Juliet Whiston waves at him from the balcony, then turns to the right. The hall narrows until it's hardly two meters across, with rosewood panels on the walls, an opulent blue runner of plush carpet down the center over glowing hardwood floors. No artwork up here, just regularly spaced wall fixtures: brass lamps with petite jade colored shades. The effect is one of coziness, a denseness of space verging on suffocation.

He locates Dame Whiston's room, knocks at the pair of double doors which approximate the location of the window he viewed her in last night. It's answered by a slight Dag Maoudi girl, reedy and pleasant. She looks up at him with wide, dark eyes, as if his appearance is cause for wonder.

"I know you," Ray says, before she can speak. "You were on the ship."

And last night, you were in a chamber underground murdering some of the students you claim to care for. But he shoves those thoughts away. Nothing is gained by revealing what he has seen.

The girl nods. "Yes. Leela. We met in the classroom. The children were very taken with your understanding of Captain Shadow. I'm glad to see you well and whole this morning."

"Well, it was an exciting evening, that's for sure, but I managed to come out of it without any significant damage." He smiles at her, disarming and casual, stifling his urge to hiss, playing the role she expects from him. "I had assumed you'd be working with the Trust, that you'd have additional teaching duties."

"Oh, I do, Mr. Marlowe, but this is a special day. We don't teach on the first day of the *Dao*."

"But you don't get the day off, I see."

A good natured frown. "There are things Amah attends to in preparation for the public events. When she has responsibilities that call her away, I like to sit with Juliet. It's good for her to see a fresh face every once in a while. She hasn't received visitors in a great number of years. She gets lonely, I think."

"I'd like to see her," Ray says.

Something that strikingly resembles suspicion enters Leela's expression, a narrowing of the eyes. "Now is perhaps not a good time. Dame Whiston has not been well lately, Mr. Marlowe."

He remains smiling, feckless, charming. "I noticed that at dinner the other evening."

"She has not improved since that time. Her mind is not strong these days, almost as weak as her body has become."

"Really, I won't trouble her. I just have a few questions I'd like to ask."

Wary. "About last night, you mean?"

Ray swallows hard, tries to divine her meaning, assumes she must mean the fire. "Last night, yes."

"I am fairly certain that she doesn't know where her son has run off to, sir. It would only distress her if you ask."

"Wow. Not many secrets around this place, are there?"

"No. It was a most terrible thing Mr. Whiston tried to do, but perhaps not surprising. He is a jealous, demanding, cruel man. He does not share his sister's love for you."

"Not exactly leaping to his defense, are you?"

Leela casts her eyes at the floor. "Perhaps I've spoken out of line, Mr. Marlowe. Forgive me."

"Hey, there's nothing to forgive. I don't disagree with you that he's a scumbag. I am a little surprised that you'd be so quick to say so."

Leela peers side to side down the hall, as if to assure herself that they're alone. She lowers her voice to a whisper, but there's still a ferocity in it, emotion as sharp and bitter as a shout. "You would not be surprised if you lived in this house, among these people. You haven't seen the things that I have seen. You don't know the extent of his corruption." She stops, reins herself in, makes an effort to smile at him. "But things will be better now, yes? You have come to New Holyoke and to the Grange. You will cast your arms around Miss Whiston and protect her from harm. You will return to this family the glory that has been lost. You are the one that she has been waiting for."

"That's what people keep telling me." This is how they're going to spin it, then. They're more than happy to let him remove the shame that is Frederick Whiston. "But I really do need to talk with Juliet, even for just a few minutes. I promise not to wear her out."

"Just a few minutes?"

"I'll be gone before you know it."

A sudden smile, toothy with realization. "You wish to speak with her about Miss Whiston! About Emma."

Ray winks at her. "Exactly."

"Then yes, you must come in. It will bring her great joy."

"I'm a big fan of joy, Leela. But could I speak to her alone, just the two of us?"

"I understand, yes." Bright eyes, nearly giggling, Leela opens the door for him. "Come in, Mr. Marlowe. I'll let her know you have arrived, then make my way out."

He steps inside before she can change her mind, before she can question the assumptions that have gotten him this far. "Thank you."

She leaves him in the front room, disappearing through a side door. It's a different sort of space than the others

Ray has encountered in the house. Large windows and the french doors leading out to the balcony flood the room with light. The walls are painted in gay and vibrant pastels. Fresh flowers on the tables in delicate, fashionable vases. Photographs on the walls rather than the dour paintings he has come to expect. There are comfortable looking chairs and a sofa in the center of the room, but Ray doesn't move that way. He looks at the pictures, moving from frame to frame. A very young Juliet Whiston here, smiling and coltish, stunning in her youth. She looks very much like her daughter. More, candid images of Juliet and children, a boy and a girl, Frederick and Emma. The three of them holding hands, bouncing through the gardens, gamboling about the town. Portrait pictures of Emma, then of Frederick, ranging from cutesy infant to gawky teen. Emma in orthodontic apparatus, which Ray finds endlessly amusing. Family images, tableaux of a distant past.

There are no pictures of Charles Whiston.

He has returned to the one of Emma in braces again when the side door opens. Leela wheels Juliet out in her ancient chair. She's dressed in white linen, with a pink shawl draped over her shoulders and heavy woolen blanket over her legs.

"Now Mr. Marlowe," she says at once, "you're going to have to swear to me that you will make no mention of having viewed that image. Emma would be destroyed if she thought you knew. It is in the nature of women to have others believe that they possess their beauty naturally."

Ray smiles, still playing the affable guest. "Swear on my honor, ma'am. She won't hear it from me."

"Come sit with me by the window, young man. Leela says you wish to speak with me."

He follows them across the room. Leela positions Juliet in the corner beside a table where she can look out over the back lawn and the late blue sky morning. Ray draws up a chair and sits opposite her so they share the same view. Leela places her hand on his shoulder, whispers that she will return in half an hour, but that she will be in the kitchen preparing Juliet's lunch should he need her. Ray nods, but doesn't bother to tell her that it would probably take him half an hour just to find the kitchen. Then she's gone, closing the door behind her, and Ray and Juliet Whiston are alone.

"You had quite an interesting night," Juliet says. "I will tell you that I was very distressed for some time. I thought you might not make it out at all, which would have been a pity."

"I'm sorry about the cottage," Ray replies.

"No one is asking you to apologize. It was a useless old house. You're the first guest we've entertained there in at least a dozen years. Someone will build another one eventually. It's what the Whistons do. We build structures, large and small, needed or not. Competition, you understand. Every Whiston has in mind the grand line of his forbearers, all leaving a legacy of construction. Building because they have always failed at making."

Juliet folds her hands in her lap, takes her eyes from the window and fixes them on Ray. "Leela believes you have come to ask me for permission to court my daughter, Mr. Marlowe. But that isn't why you're here, is it?"

"I like Emma very much, but no, that isn't what I want to talk to you about."

"So coy. You love her. What is this *like*? I am a batty old woman, but I'm not blind. You love her; she loves you. The rest is just details and complications and social fuddy-duddies looking for an excuse to stick their noses into business that is not theirs."

She speaks with a pleasant, beaming bitterness. Pain so old it no longer stings, so that only the form of it

remains.

"I'm not fooling you at all, am I?"

"I've had much more experience at being coy than you have. If you were less clumsy at it, I doubt that I would like you at all. You don't particularly care if I like you, Mr. Marlowe. I understand that. You don't care if anyone really likes you. You're going to do what your heart or your mind tells you is right. You're not going to allow yourself to be distracted by the wishes and intentions of others. It's a very honest philosophy. What is the phrase? *Down to earth*. You and my Frederick are much alike in that way. He recognizes it, I think. That's probably why he tried to kill you last night."

She could not have stunned him more if she'd struck him. "You saw him?"

"Of course I saw him--just as I saw you. You entered the house, then you departed. A short time later, he followed. How could I not have seen it? What else do I do but sit and watch?"

"But you didn't tell anyone?"

"Frederick does what he believes is right. He thought it would be best if you were dead, I suppose. But he's also not very accomplished at committing crimes of violence. I had faith both in his ineptitude and in your competency, so I thought it best to let events play out as they would. I will admit that I had grave doubts for awhile, when you continually refused to emerge. You must sleep soundly." Juliet laughs, sounding oddly unaffected. She laughs like a little girl. "But that's enough about Frederick. You don't want to talk about him. You want to talk about the *Dao*."

Ray sits back, tries to collect his thoughts. "I do, but--"

"But nothing. You knew it was Frederick. I've confirmed it for you. Ask something else."

She's right. He doesn't have time to talk about Frederick. "Tell me about Martin Schmidt."

"Oh, you *have* been digging, haven't you? That isn't a name that's been spoken in this house in years."

"Not out loud, at least," Ray says gently.

Juliet reclines her head against the back of her chair, a deeply private and satisfied smile on her lips. "He was so lovely, my Martin. Of course, we were young. Dreadfully young, really. Who knows what sort of man he would have become? But in his youth, he was splendid and strong. He had a mind that could encompass half the galaxy, always picking at problems, at flaws, at things that didn't make sense to him. And he was tireless in his pursuit of explanations, of truth behind the facades. I think that's why Charles hated him so. Martin was everything Charles wanted to be, but was not. And Charles had everything Martin wanted, but couldn't have."

"Including you," Ray says. Just a nudge.

But Juliet snaps her head up, glares at him. "Charles did not have me, not in the way Martin did. Martin I loved. Charles had only his obsession, his desire until afterward."

"After Martin was murdered."

"Yes!"

"But you married Charles anyway, even though you knew."

A look enters Juliet's eyes, languid and distant. She hunches her shoulders. "Hush now. Shhhh. Hush, Juliet. Some things we do not speak."

Ray persists, disturbed. "Charles courted you while you were in mourning."

"Yes, courted." A dry chuckle, like he has brushed over a secret. "Charles was very vigorous in his *courting*, though only he would recognize it as such."

"Tell me."

"Hush, Juliet." She shakes her head. With rasping significance, she hisses, "*He changed my mind.*"

"He thought you were the one, didn't he? Charles believed it."

A sudden scowl. "I was not the one. He should have known! But he believed he could make me the one. But they do not make; they only construct. They build in order to hide what they are not."

"And what it is it that they aren't, Juliet? What are they hiding?"

"That they aren't the one. Not in years, decades. Their glory has departed."

Ray clenches his teeth. "The one what?"

"Hush, hush."

"Juliet, the one *what*?"

"Shhhh." Finger to her lips, face clouded, amused and horrified at once. "Hush."

Ray backs up, tries to find another way, but aware that he's losing her. Juliet is wandering down dusty and forgotten tracks he has not imagined. "So you weren't the one, though Charles believed you were. And after he believed, after he courted you, you became the vessel for the *Dao*. The vessel, but not the one." He changed my mind. Sharply, Ray asks, "Is Emma the one?"

"You are the one. Emma is the vessel."

"Emma has always been the vessel? Since she was born."

"Yes! She was not constructed. Like you."

"Like me?"

"You hear, you see, you dream. The *mhuruk-a*."

He's moving in circles, getting no closer, but he's near enough that he can feel it, a subtext that makes him tremble. "Do you know what the *mhuruk-a* is, Juliet?"

Juliet claps her hands together, gleeful. "You are a boy full of tricks, aren't you? Asking questions for which you already know the answer. You've spoken to her. I could see that from the moment I met you. You have the mark of one whom she has touched. You are recognized because she knows you. She knows and sees and tastes. She whispers that you are the one so that we know also. She is, and you are, and together you are one."

"And the *Dao*," he demands. "What is the significance of the *Dao*?"

Juliet cackles at him. "To find the one, of course. To make where one cannot be constructed. But we've lost the old ways. Even the Dag Maoudi have forgotten. They taught us to meet the *mhuruk-a*; they instructed us in the ways of the vessel, but we have lost the essence. We communicate, but do not commune."

For an instant, Ray remembers. Binary code, a subtle shift in ones and zeroes, an attempt to comprehend the *shed*.

"He changed your mind," Ray says.

"They construct what they cannot make. Because they are impatient."

"What did they do to you, Juliet?"

A whisper, a lowering of the eyes. Juliet Whiston puts her head back. "I was not always so frail, so mad, so broken. But I am not a Whiston by blood, and all of their construction could not make me so. But in many ways, more Whiston than Charles. Ha!"

Male and female vessels. "Charles was weak. Like Frederick."

"And in trying to make himself strong, he was destroyed."

"But Emma...Emma is strong."

"Don't be afraid for Emma. She is of the blood. She rises."

Ray hears, swallows hard. "But not like Frederick."

A devastating, savage smile curls her lips. "Hush."

Though he prods her, begs her, Juliet Whiston will say no more. By the time Leela returns, she is asleep in her chair.

Chapter Eight

Sunset. Evening. Streaks of orange and molten gold stretching out like fingers, like tentacles over the city of Blackheath Grange from West to East, continent to sea; sun dipping beneath the tree and cliff line, casting long shadows over this tenuous human habitation. One by one, lanterns spark and candles light, a sudden sea of stars twinkle in the gloaming until it is exactly that--a sea of stars and constellations and galaxies unknown and unnamed, and the spaces between the flickering are fraught with shadow and peril and loss.

Ray and Emma stand beneath the Grange portico, beside the idling limousines, surrounded by retainers and domestics, Dag Maoudi and Trust children. The house behind them is dark except for the candles guttering in the windows and a brilliant lantern like the lens of a lighthouse in the window of the Faery Tower. As the city springs to life for the evening celebration, the welcoming of the *Dao*, they watch, awaiting some signal Ray cannot guess.

He doesn't care to guess, and would be just as happy if the signal never came. He feels the threat of this evening and the next and the one following throbbing in his bones, humming through his flesh like he's standing too close to high voltage lines. And Emma, all he has to do is look at her, eyes nearly closed, head down and shoulders slumped, to know what she's thinking. Not a celebration for her, but an ordeal; not a joy, but something to be endured.

In the house, when she had finally come down, presented herself to Amah and the aged, wise Dag Maoudi women, wearing a deep purple gown, long as the robes of a Babylonian priestess, her face occluded by veils sheer and fine so that only her eyes and her slender, white hands were visible--after the cackling and head-nodding women were done with her, she had come to him. Nervous, face averted as though she could not bear the sight of him, all of her lost behind veil and fabric, she had whispered to him.

Are you sure you want to come? No one will think badly of you if you stay, if you choose not to witness this.

Not a chance. He'd said so to her, and taken her hand in his, and the smile he could not see on her lips blossomed glorious and shining in her eyes.

There's no one else like you, she said, not in the whole universe.

And he thought, that's what people keep telling me.

Stay close to me, Ray. I don't want to lose you.

As if there was anything else he could have done.

It's what he's doing now, all but clinging to her, all but throwing his arms around her to shield her from harm. And he can hear the elder Dag Maoudi click their tongues at him. He can feel Amah, heavy arms over her chest, boring her stares into his back, trying to slither an awareness of her disapproval into his skull. Fuck them and fuck her and fuck this *Dao*. Only Emma matters; Emma who is strong according to her mother, strong enough. But Charles and Fram and the great line of Whiston men had believed Juliet was strong, too. Fuck them all.

They had given her over to the hands of the *shed*, and she didn't even know it.

Now he sees it, a sudden leap of flame, a surge of light in the center of the city where the green would be, the signal they've been waiting for. The limousine doors open, people begin to clamber inside. Ray follows Emma, and is not surprised to find Amah crowding in behind him. First Amah, then others of the ancient Dag Maoudi, what Ray supposes would constitute the tribal elders, each of them doddering, hands trembling,

leaning on canes. Each of them tattoo scarred, ebon eyes blazing, lips tight.

Ray and Emma sit in the back, and though there's room beside them, the Dag Maoudi sit on the opposite side, glaring like a silent jury. Emma says nothing and peers out the window. Gathering herself the way a soldier does in the hour before a great battle, thinking death thoughts and fear thoughts and rehearsing the small pieces of the battle plan that are actually known to him. At least so Ray imagines. He doesn't know what she's thinking, because she doesn't speak to him. He chooses to believe she is silent because she doesn't want to talk openly in front of the Dag Maoudi.

He has no good reason to believe this. They've seen it all before. They know exactly what is going to happen next. He's the only stranger here.

After a time, four or five minutes along the way, Amah says, "She has no awareness of you. You clutch her hand as though you would hold her, but she is not there. She is the vessel, and the *mhuruk-a* has filled her."

"I promised Emma I would stay close to her."

"The *mhuruk-a* does not care what promises were made. She will exercise her own will."

Ray smiles, cold and evil. "We've talked already. The *mhuruk-a* knows she doesn't particularly impress me."

There is a flutter of Dag Maoudi conversation, elder whispering to elder. Ray can guess what they're saying. Amah frowns at him, her expression stony, fierce.

"You mock what you do not understand."

"And I think you know exactly what I understand. Don't you?"

"You have comprehended nothing."

"My grievous lack of knowledge must be why Freddy tried so hard to kill me. He didn't want me to embarrass the family."

Another flurry of hushed conversation. Ray goes on, "This is why you brought her back, isn't it? Back from Strat in such a hurry. It had nothing to do with Juliet's health; that was just a story you put out there for the press. Juliet has been crazy for years. But you needed Emma for the *Dao*. Because she's the vessel, and she's strong...and you didn't have time to train anyone else to take her place. So you forced her to come back and do something she hates, to submit herself to this for family and colony and the glorious future you people are always going on about. Oh yeah, I can see why she cares so much about this fuckhole planet. You all treat her so well."

At last, they're silent. He doesn't know if he stunned them, or merely made them too angry for words. Amah only shakes her head. "And what will you do, Mr. Marlowe? Will you stop the *mhuruk-a* from doing what it is she chooses to do? Will you pit your will against hers?"

"I'm not going to let her hurt Emma."

And when this is done, I'm going to make certain she's never in the position to hurt Emma again. That *you* can never hurt her again. I'll take her to a place completely beyond your reach, and I'll keep her there forever while you dry up and blow away. You and your whole world.

He wants to say these things to her, to shove his defiance in Amah's face where she can see it and know it,

drown in it. But he doesn't, and it's just as well. They're out of time for vitriol. The cars decelerate on the edge of the city, and they're no longer alone. Not just a procession of Whiston wealth and finery anymore, but streets crowded with onlookers, standing in near silence, lined up as though they're waiting for a parade. It is a parade; a parade of one. Just Emma, teetering on the edge of possession by the *mhuruk-a*, by the *shed*.

The limousines roll to a stop, the doors open. On cue, a swarm of Eyelens cameras swoop and hover to document the glory. Emma reaches out, touches the door handle, pauses, looks back. Looks at him, and her eyes are wide, brimming with apprehension that is spiraling toward terror.

"Ray?" *Ray*.

And for a moment, he isn't sure if she has spoken aloud, or directly into his mind, but he *hears* her, almost tastes her in that split, burning instant. She is inside him, touching his consciousness, and he is immersed in her, feels her, knows her like the unfolding of a familiar and beloved country beneath him. Her need, her fear, her exultation. She is vast and splendid; she is the scent of cinnamon and the taste of vanilla on his tongue. She is the echo of memory and place and experience that he has forgotten or never shared or only imaged with such deep and longing clarity that it is indistinguishable from truth.

Then she's gone, and in the wake of her is darkness and emptiness. A hole in the fabric of himself.

She climbs out, leaving him to scramble after her. As she emerges, there is a cry from the audience like a cheer. Like a cheer, but something else. It is heavier, limned with hunger and savagery. There is an alien touch to it, and a feel that is brutish, mammalian, predatory. It is the mutter of lions on the edge of an African savannah watching the antlered and meat-laden herd pass by.

The cameras withdraw to a discreet distance, wide angle shots for better footage, or because their operators are still wary of Ray's reflexes. A heartbeat of silence, then another. Emma stands in the center of the street, her head turning side to side as though she lacks orientation. Ray is aware that the Dag Maoudi, the Whiston surrogate clan, have melted into the crowd, behind the garland vines strung along the way. They are alone; he and Emma and the greedy thousands watching.

And so the *Dao* begins. A sound like the approach of a million starving locust, a buzz and hum, crashing through the canyon streets like a wave. A chant rolling toward them from the distance, begun a kilometer distant, taken up by the assembly--one voice, one throat, one person at a time until it grips them all.

Sha-oa con kiri ton! Mhuruk-a tala miri-ya! Kiri-ya!

Emma listens, hears, hearkens to the song. She is a being made of stone, unmoving and unmovable. Then arms rise, twine above her head; body moves, languid and supple, sinuous like a serpent. She is hips and thighs, head nodding around and eyes closed, an unconscious dervish. Gradually, the rhythm with which she began slips into harmony with the chant and stomp of the gathered crowd.

She dances for them, flinging herself in a wild and gyrating frenzy, spinning down the middle of the street. They sing, and when they reach their refrain, their frenzied *Kiri-ya!*, Emma cries out with them and springs into the air. As she moves, the throng follows, some along the sidewalks, some venturing into the street, some drawing up from behind until she is the center point of a vast and moving circle. Ray is drawn along with her, a short distance apart. He scans the faces around him, darker and more shadowed as the sun vanishes, sinister in the flickering lamplight.

So they move, tracking her, bodies piling along the edges, echo of chant and song deepening, thrumming, howling until it fills his head, deafens him. It's ear-splitting and consciousness numbing all at once. The roar of ecstasy, or verging on ecstasy. They wend through the streets, along a path delineated with garlands and

lanterns, pale flowers and blazes of light. The audience brings out their own lamps, their own candles, and suddenly they're a progression of pilgrims climbing the hill toward the middle of the town and the tump of the green. And Ray is aware of a dissonance, a stumble in the chant wherever he goes, a buzz like anger in the voices. Once or twice, people reach out to him, try to grab his arms, his shoulders, pull him back. But he shakes them off, remains in Emma's circle of protection, chasing after her.

The crowd is impossible, thousands upon thousands, a suffocating wall of breath and heat and oily sweat. In the square, between the brownstones, they pack the open spaces and trample the lawn, disperse into the buildings where they hang out the windows, congregate on the roofs, a hive of mammalian greed.

Emma leads him along the concrete berm, secure in her bubble of space, around the back of the mound and toward the sea. Here there are steps in the hill, a long climb to the crest and winged statue. Beside the statue is a great bonfire, axe-felled trunks stacked two meters tall, flames licking the night air, leaping as high as the buildings which surround.

Emma climbs and Ray follows two steps behind. She rises to the crest of the hill where in the days before she had shown him the tent and he had heard the construction of the stage. He can see the stage now, a thing of raw wood and gray stone, whole slabs of rock dredged out of the ground, stacked shoulder to shoulder, bored with runlets and holes, shallow depressions like the footprints of gods. And in the center, a square dais, narrow blocks of stone carved with symbols stained black, symbols that dance in the uneven light, shudder with meaning and depth that is almost known, but utterly impenetrable. Atop the dais is an altar of square, planed edges, looking older than the stone around it, time worn and age chewed. And beside altar is another thing, rounded at the top, tall as a man, black as volcanic stone, but reflecting the bonfire's shimmer as though it is burnished. It is etched with rings, line upon line, rings and figures and carvings so ancient they appear as only vague suggestions on its skin.

Monolith. Plinth. Totem.

Ray sees it and almost falters, sucks in his breath. The stele from the chamber last night; the stele from his dream.

But this is not a dream. This is the flesh and bone of nightmare.

Altar and stone and Emma rising toward it, ascending the stage as the crowd gathers around, stumbles up the hill until they crowd the edges, pressing close. Ray stops at the edge, uncertain, unable to go nearer. There are too many eyes, too many hands, too much that can happen which he isn't able to guess.

With a final, resounding *Kiri-ya!*, the chant ceases. There is a rustle of motion, the sense of ten thousand drawn breaths, a moment of confusion. The crowd parts, divides like a cancerous cell to create a wide swath of empty space. From this corridor emerge torches, tall like pikestaffs, clutched like shepherds' crooks by dark Dag Maoudi. A slow procession climbs the face of the hill, laboring up slick grass to the stage, to stairs in the front, up to the altar and Emma beside it. A dozen young men, hale and strong, smiling and tense, brave before the congregation, yet exuding a palpable terror. Standing in a line, clad in short robes, white and purple, their backs to the crowd, their faces to the altar.

And leading them, Amah. Dour, fervent, stiff, Amah.

She steps away from the procession, midway between the young men and Emma. She bows deeply with her hands clasped together against her chest.

"*Mhuruk-a*," she says, and the assembled audience leans in to hear her. "Great *mhuruk-a*, spirit, being, immensity, one to whom time and space and distance are naught, we greet you as our kind have done for

generation upon generation, in welcome and in hope, seeking blessing. Seeking blessing and bringing offering, because your hunger is great, and your hunger is known to us."

She speaks, and Emma turns her head slowly, drawn from the crowd to Amah. Even at this distance, well wide of her path of vision, Ray can feel her, the weight of her scrutiny, the terrible and flashing intensity of her gaze. His knees weaken involuntarily, and he knows that if she looked at him that way, if she focused completely on him in that moment, he would fall. He would tumble and fall and continue falling forever.

Because there is nothing of Emma in her gaze. It is pure otherness, pure *mhuruk-a*.

But Amah does not wither beneath her. She only averts her eyes, fixes her jaw, continues. "It is you, *mhuruk-a*, who brings wind and wave, tide and rain. It is you who carries the sun high into the heavens and gives strength to our limbs. It is you who makes us vital and brims us with power to do, and to will and to beat down the enemies who would beset us. You are the harmony between body and soul, man and beast, spirit and season. You moor us to the cycle of seasons and teach us when to plant, when to harvest, when to dig and when to rest. You are all things to all who are faithful. You are, and we exist, and we are one with you."

The *mhuruk-a* answers in a voice that is not Emma's, but is dry, creaking, the sound of old bones. "What is this that you bring to me?"

"Your offering, *mhuruk-a*. For your hunger."

"I do not hunger for these."

A pause, but there is no confusion in it. Amah nods confidently. "They have been tested and instructed according to the ancient ways. With them, you may share your lost communion."

"They are not the one."

"No, they are not the one, but they may suffice."

Silence. The *mhuruk-a* waits, draws her gaze away from Amah to the offering, the milling young men. Barely a glance, then a snort of derision. She turns her head away, and the crowd utters a gasp.

At Ray's back, someone whispers furiously, "She's rejecting the offering!"

But she turns her head toward Ray, and not just her head, but her body follows, stepping across the stage, leaving the offering behind her. A rustle like alarm passes through the audience, watching the *mhuruk-a* do something they did not expect. Alarm and anticipation. To Ray, she tilts her head, curious, blinking. She comes to him, and Ray can't move away, doesn't want to move away. It's Emma who approaches him; Emma in form if not in spirit, and he promised her...

...but there's something else inside him, surrounding him, a drawing and a dawning and a quickening. He feels his heart thump slow and thunderous in his chest, and there is a new sensation that fills him. He remembers Emma, the vanilla taste of her essence, but this is not Emma. It is complete substance. It has weight and magnetism. Even as he stands there and trembles, he senses her vastness, the *mhuruk-a*, a place of sinew and strength, of distances beyond the comprehension of human mind, of knowledge and age and...and a taste like meat, coppery with blood, firm between the teeth and full of warmth and lust and joy. He feels her and knows her, is known by her.

"You are the one," she says to him. "You are the one, but you are not the offering. You are known to me. You are known to the vessel. We long for you. We long to be one."

Without understanding, Ray thinks, *Yes!*

"It has been long years since I have known the one."

Yes.

"Long years since I have had communion, since I have been sated on other but table scraps."

Yes.

"Do you know this hunger?"

He does. He feels it, welling up from a great and secret depth, a dark place in his mind, deeper than his mind, something and someplace ancient, untouched, dense and spinning like a singularity. It is place filled with the chill of space and icy, brackish water. A place of neglect and darkness, of emptiness and loneliness. The place of the outcast and the far flung. The unhomed and the robbed of habitation. Dispossession in favor of lesser beings, weakness, stolen birthright.

Ray barely breathes. His body is wracked with shivers, temblors, the shifting of sacred plates of being.

He peers into the eyes of the *mhuruk-a*, the ageless, the alien, and there is darkness there. Darkness and light, a faint, but brilliant spark like naked lightning. And in that light is joy and communion, knowing and being known, power and hunger and *everything*. The whole universe in a pinpoint of light, offered to him for possession. For habitation.

She says to him, *I am and you are, and we are One. Do you will it?*

Yes!

But he says, "Emma? What are you doing to me?"

Commune with me, Brother. You are known to me. You are known to us. Come and see.

And he wants to. He wants to touch the longing inside him, to feel this hunger and meet it, to share it and fill the empty space. He wants to be one.

Where he should be confused, stunned, emptied of himself and borne to the ground by the will and the weight of the *shed*, he knows only clarity. He has ascended to a great height, the pinnacle of a mountain, breathing air crisp and new, where the sun shines on him alone. He could step off this cliff and tumble into a golden morning, an eternal fall into light and air and the embrace of joy.

But behind him is Mikhail Brezhnaya and the twisted corpses of Ba'dai.

Kilgore and Rodriguez and Ziggy.

Becker and Sorensen and the sacrificial lamb that was *Paraclete*.

Micah.

The fear in John Robert's gaze, and the horrors of the Dag Maoudi chamber.

Their breath is hot on his neck; their presence is dense and tangled; their touch is the rot and stink and

grappling humidity of jungle, of flesh, of body. They promise pain and loss, struggle and failure and death. They are everything the *mhuruk-a* is not. They are the antithesis of communion. They are isolation and faulty knowledge. They are impotence. They are touch and sense that are meaningless. They are duality of being.

And they are Emma. Emma alone. Promise and duty and responsibility.

"What are you doing to me?" he asks again, helpless to understand.

"Commune with me," the *mhuruk-a* says, and it is Emma's voice he hears.

Her eyes flare in the dim light; her gaze pours into him like liquid fire. "For you I am vast. I am impenetrable. I am a creature of mystery. I am the earth goddess and the spirit that moves through the air. I am joy where you've borne sorrow. I am delight where you have known pain. I am light in your darkness, brilliance and incandescence that you alone can see. I am the secret places where you run to hide when the shadows shriek overhead. I am everything you do not yet even know that you need."

Ray swallows, his throat thick, parched. "I don't want you. Only Emma. Emma alone."

Distant, through a deafening screen, there is a roar, angry, like breakers crashing against a far shore. Human voices entwined with an ancient shriek of loss.

"Faithless," the vessel growls, jabbing a finger of accusation at him. "You are faithless and lost. Alone. Cut off from the congregation of being. Lifeless, empty, banished."

She goes on, focusing energy, clawing at him with fire, with frenzy, with outrage. And it licks at him, touches his nerves, spirals along his limbs as though it would peel the skin from his bones. Ray remembers this part. They haven't learned any new tricks.

He raises his hand, shows her his ring "You haven't been paying attention. Brother learned a new lesson. You can't touch me. And if I give the ring to Emma, you won't be able to touch her, either."

And he expects her to erupt, to bellow and hiss and do everything but burst into flame. But the *mhuruk-a* studies him, the circle of his ring. She smiles, and there is no malice in it, as though she expected it all along. A game of wits.

"You are wise and clever and worthy. If you were not clever, you would not be the one. But your knowledge is limited. I am the vessel, and the vessel is myself. To touch the infinite of contemplation is to lose us both, vessel and being. Is that what you wish?"

A vision fills his mind with perfect clarity. Him springing toward her, slipping the ring onto Emma's finger like a token of love. A shriek of agony, Emma frozen, rigid. The *shed* drawn away, sucked from her like marrow from bone, caught in the ring...taking Emma with her. The essence of Emma so that only the flesh remains. And Ray is left alone, with nothing.

Amah's words recalled to him: *If it is Emma Whiston that you want, you must want her above all. Above duty and friendship, loyalty to your profession, dedication to all that has pushed you to this place and this time. You cannot have Emma and anything else. It is Emma or those other things. To love her, to cling to her, is to accept the destruction of all else that has made you who you are. The family demands it. Emma's nature demands it.*

"The nature of the vessel is to welcome the *mhuruk-a*. Separate the vessel from its nature, and the vessel ceases to be." She claps her hands together and bows deeply to him. "Kiri-ya, Brother. You are worthy, but

you are not yet ready. I will satisfy my hunger in other ways. Perhaps on the morrow you will show me joy."

She strides away, and the abruptness of her withdrawal nearly drops Ray to his knees. He stumbles after her, after Emma or the *mhuruk-a*, he can't tell which. As he watches, she lifts herself onto the altar, spreads her legs wide, thumbs clasps he cannot see. The assembly of New Holyoke roars their approval, and she, Emma and *mhuruk-a* is nude, glorious, exultant. She waves to the first young man, and he approaches, tripping over his own feet, falls into her embrace.

Ray wants to look away, to not see this. This man's hands on Emma's body, his erect penis splitting the front of his robe, the *mhuruk-a* closing about him, pulling him near, pulling him inside herself. And her cry of pleasure as she takes him. And takes him. And the crowd chanting, cheering, deafening in the background. Shouting the young man's name in encouragement.

It only takes a few seconds, a handful of vigorous thrusts. The young man groans into her, and Emma pushes him away, his tumescence already fading. He lifts his face to her, grinning and stupid, eyes dulled. He watches her for some signal Ray does not understand. Emma spreads her knees apart, wide until the joints of her hips pop...and those nearest to her and in the front row peer and see, bend toward her. As the viscous white fluid of his ejaculate runs out of her, drips down the side of the altar.

Emma, the *mhuruk-a* frowns. Disappointment.

In a loud voice, she proclaims: "His seed is rejected. He is not worthy to make the communion."

Stunned, the crowd slumps, mutters. A collective moan of grief.

The young man, rejected, dejected, lets his shoulders sag and hangs his head. Dag Maoudi take him, one on each arm, lead him off to the side. They stand him before the stele, shoulder against stone, where he raises his eyes to scan the crowd. He nods at something, someone he sees there, but his expression is impenetrable.

Then knives, a grunt like agony, blood. The people of New Holyoke howl, a sound that is part outrage, part joy.

And Ray stiffens, watching. All these people, this gathered congregation, they watch with him, and they do not protest. They welcome the sacrifice of the *Dao* as though they yearn for it. What he witnesses is completely beyond his comprehension.

The *mhuruk-a*, arms and legs spread to receive the next offering, whips her head to him. The voice that speaks into his mind is sibilant, hissing, vindictive. As cold and arid as the dark reaches of space.

This was your choice. You could have spared them this offering.

"No!"

Amah--massive, solid, ponderous--turns, points her finger at Ray. "Remove him. He has betrayed the spirit of the *Dao*."

He can't think fast enough, can't do anything. Ray surges toward Emma. "Emma, no!"

But there are people in the way, a wall of bodies, obstructions. He lashes out with his fists, connects with jaws he hardly sees, rushes forward. They grapple with his limbs and he shouts, kicks, struggles.

Someone he does not see hits him. He staggers back, and he is struck again. A sharp blow to the back of his

head with the jarring, blotting force of a brick. He's still bellowing as his knees fold, as darkness rushes at him. Powerful hands grab him, hoist him into the air on his back, bear him away from the stage unable to move.

And over the heads of the congregation, carried aloft like an offering to the gods, he can still see her, *mhuruk-a* and vessel seated on the altar of sacrifice. He cries out to her with a voice that makes no sound.

The last thing he knows is Emma welcoming another candidate for communion into herself.

Voices.

There's nothing inbound for another three weeks, and that's assuming they don't decide to alter their course in light of recent events.

Well we can't just keep him here. We're lucky they didn't kill him. You've got to do something.

Like what, exactly? I don't have anything with an interstellar drive.

Then you'll just have to hide him out until something does arrive.

You're overreacting. There's always a frenzy during the Dao. It will pass. It always passes.

That's the bloody problem, isn't it? It's so easy to overlook the madness when it's just a few days a year.

I'm not in the mood to have this discussion again.

Ray opens his eyes. Big mistake. Light stabs at him like ice picks directly into his brain. A thermonuclear device detonates inside his skull. He rolls onto his side, shattering bones that seem to be made of glass, vomits into darkness.

He coughs, and there is just the rattle of his lungs. Nothing else seems to break.

Tries again, slowly, first one eye and then the other. He stares down into a pool of his own bile on a spot of bare wood floor. The throb in the back of his skull starts up, and he gingerly probes the spot where there seems to be the most pain. Winces. But it's mostly a lump, matted hair, only a little hot and sticky blood still seeping out.

You should have given him a more detailed briefing.

How could I have guessed he was going to do something like this? And it isn't like he's one of mine. I have no control over him.

How could you not have guessed? Use your brain, man! It's obvious that he can't keep away from her.

You'd think she would have warned him.

And how would you have handled that if you were her, eh? 'Oh, darling, by the way, once a year I have to fuck a bunch of strange men on a public stage, and those who don't make the grade are sacrificed in the name of community spirit or fertility blessings or some other lunatic explanation. I don't properly understand it, of course, but we've done it for so long, it hardly seems appropriate to start rocking the boat now.'

We should have put a stop to this a long time ago.

Onto his back again, blinking at the ceiling, at the dim lamp beside the bed, the faded paper on the walls. To his left is a door hanging ajar, and beyond it a hallway that appears just as worn and dingy as the room itself. A room stacked with yellowed paper, folded newspapers, dirty dishes.

His mouth tastes like vomit, sour and hot. Bile and ash. Head full of gauze, packed tight and desiccated, like an Egyptian mummy tastefully seasoned with about a ton of sand and a thousand years of baking sun.

He's not going to be able to accomplish anything, not after this. No one is going to help him.

You're helping him. I'm helping him. We can't be the only two sane people on this planet.

If you don't find a way to get him home, he's a dead man. I can promise you that.

I told you: three weeks at the minimum. There's nothing else I can do.

He's up, on his feet, using the wall for support. The room spins about him, but it's a slow, leisurely spin. One he can negotiate if he concentrates. He sets attainable goals. Two steps to the door, hugging the wall of the hallway, trying not to do anything clumsy like knocking the picture frames awry.

Finally, the end of the corridor. Thomas Malcolm and Colonel Ritchie in the front room of Malcolm's living space. Ray recognizes it. He was here, what, yesterday, seated on the chair where Ritchie is sitting now. The memory is hazy. He doesn't remember what he and Malcolm were talking about.

"I'm not going anywhere," he croaks at them.

Then falls flat on his face. A few seconds of missing time. Feels like seconds, could be hours, but when he's conscious again, his cheek *and* the back of his head ache. His neck is sore too, but that seems to be mostly because it's lolling his head at a terrible angle against the back of the couch. And the rest of his face is numb, because they've packed ice against his jaw, beneath his skull, over the bridge of his nose.

He says, "Ugh."

"Stubborn fool," Malcolm responds, studying him over the edge of the ice pack that obscures Ray's vision. "You should have stayed in bed."

"I have work to do."

"Oh, like inciting another public riot? It took the full planetside EED force to get you away from the last group of your fans."

"That's not saying much," Ray points out.

"You must be feeling better. You think you're funny again."

"You called out the troops?" Ray lifts his head so he can face them.

"Of course. I couldn't very well let them haul you off and murder you in the street. We have enough of that during the *Dao* without adding to the body count."

Ray remembers. It's like poking at a fresh wound with a needle. "They killed him."

Malcolm shakes his head like someone who's trying to explain basic concepts of advanced physics to a hedgehog. "You should have done your homework before plunging in, Commander Marlowe." He glances back over his shoulder to Ritchie. "I told you, he doesn't know anything. You should have briefed him in more detail."

"I don't understand," Ray says. "The Dag Maoudi...they murdered him and the people just watched. They *wanted* it to happen. They anticipated it."

Malcolm places his hand gently on Ray's shoulder. "Welcome to New Holyoke."

"You just let it happen. All of you."

It's Ritchie that looks away, but he says nothing.

Ray goes on, feeling outraged, feeling emptied. "Is this what you meant when you said you tried not to interfere with colonial affairs, Colonel?"

"What would you have me do, Marlowe? Tell me that. The *Dao* had been established long before I took command of this outpost. And what if I did complain up the chain of command, eh? Who would believe me? If they sent me more troops--which is highly unlikely, and you know it--who would I go after? Who would speak out against the Whistons? Anything I did would look like the EED directing military pressure against the Whiston family because of their proprietary charter, plain and simple."

"Excuses," Ray snaps. He rounds on Malcolm quickly enough to make his throbbing head spin. "And what about you? You don't care either? Even though you know it isn't just the *Dao*? You know they're murdering the Trust children, too. Just like Martin Schmidt. To feed the *mhuruk-a*."

"And what would you have done? Stopped it somehow?" Malcolm says softly, neither angry nor defensive. "As long as there has been a New Holyoke, there has been a *Dao*. As long as there has been a female vessel, there have been public sacrifices of the unworthy. Can't very well have all these men who have been sticking their reproductive bits into your wife or daughter hanging about to brag of their conquest."

It's unfathomable. The expressions on the faces in the crowd. Neither shock nor surprise, just a sort of savage glee.

"It's not that simple," Ray rasps around the ache in his head. "It isn't what you think it is, and it isn't just about social manipulation. Malcolm, they're murdering people in the public square! Why hasn't anyone stopped them?"

"Because the people want it, Ray. The Whistons want it. Oh, it's not so bad as it seems on the surface, I suppose. Shocking, yes, if you haven't been adequately prepared." Malcolm stabs an accusatory glare at Colonel Ritchie, but continues without a pause. "The candidates were volunteers, applicants who would take the great risk of being rejected rather than miss the opportunity to be elevated by the *mhuruk-a*. To be the one to father a *Dao* child, with all the social benefits and financial considerations that follow--that is an awfully tempting offer to just reject out of hand. There has been no shortage of applicants, believe me."

There's a coarse, gratuitous mockery in Malcolm's tone. Sarcasm so tired he doesn't even realize he's doing it. "This is the way they negotiate the balance of power on New Holyoke, Ray. On the first night, the community puts forth the young men they have chosen, the ones the people deem worthy for inclusion among the pantheon of the powerful. The ones they want to be the next media moguls, the next Forum representatives, the next directors of Whelemat."

"And then they watch while the Dag Maoudi kill them," Ray says, flat and angry. Because the *shed* demands blood. The blood of martyrs.

"It is the way things have always been done."

And Ray understands, even if Malcolm and Ritchie do not. They don't carry the knowledge he does about the nature of the *shed*. They do not share his context. How much influence could a *shed* exert given a constant diet of blood sacrifice? How many minds would it have to change, control, bend to make something like the egregious bloodshed of the *Dao* sensical? So much power. It is beyond his comprehension.

"It has to stop."

Malcolm only shrugs. "Perhaps one day it will. Emma has done her part to see that it does, you might say. She has never found them worthy. In the old days, when I was a child and Juliet was the vessel, there were more selections. She bore the children of a great many men, and she accepted the seed of others. It gave the people hope, a sense of vibrancy. But Emma is different. She has changed everything. The candidates chosen by the community have rarely been accepted. The candidates she chooses herself, as she will do tomorrow night...well, they call out to her and she rarely hears them. It's never the eight or ten or twelve that her mother used to take, but one or two. Last *Dao*, she wandered the streets of the city all night long without accepting anyone. Thus, some say that the *Dao* is failing, that Emma's unwillingness to choose will turn people away from tolerating it."

Ray leans forward, elbows on his knees. He buries his face in his hands. Malcolm squeezes his shoulder again. "I know this must be hard for you to accept. But it simply is, Ray, as entrenched in the public consciousness as Terran Forum elections or the necessity of organized religion to mediate between man and God. There are always people willing to take great risks for fame and glory. On New Holyoke, if you cannot be a *Dao* child, the next best position is that of a *Dao* parent. And once or twice in a generation, there is the grandest opportunity of all--the chance to be grafted into the Whiston clan itself. For a chance at that future, many are willing to sacrifice themselves. You, of course, have thrown a wrench into the whole process. You have exacerbated the uneasiness about the whole legitimacy of the *Dao*, because you were the one that Emma was going to choose. She had finally selected an heir."

"Not Emma," Ray growls back.

Malcolm waves his hand impatiently. "Whatever. Why do you think the crowd was so angry with you? The colony has been waiting nearly four years for the selection of Emma's mate, practically from the day she came of age and assumed her role as the vessel. You were chosen, and you rejected her. You rejected the assurance of the colony's future well being by condemning the *Dao* as an illegitimate transaction between the people and the Whistons. You turned your back on all the blood that has been shed in the name of the *Dao*. People don't want to think they've been wrong."

"There's so much you don't understand," Ray says quietly. "Why would they *want* to be controlled by the *mhuruk-a*?"

"There is no *mhuruk-a*, Ray. It is fantasy, illusion, religious trapping. Certainly, some people believe, the same way some people are Presbyterians or Catholics or Muslims, but not all of us. We recognize the *Dao* for what it is: social engineering. That's what it is, what it's always been. It is the great Whiston experiment. The *Dao* is a public seal of approval for certain elements and individuals whom the Whiston family decides are most beneficial to the colony's future, and the chance to legitimately remove those who might be perceived as a threat to Whiston control. They learned the technique from the Dag Maoudi long ago and put it into practice here on New Holyoke where no one could speak out against them. It's how they maintain power.

"The people of New Holyoke maintain the illusion of belief because the power the Whistons do have has never been more precariously held. Since Fram passed and left us with Charles, and since Charles could leave us no better hope than Frederick, the family has slowly faltered. All that stands between this colony and the departure of the Whiston largesse is Emma's womb. If she will not provide a Whiston heir, New Holyoke's days are numbered."

"You don't believe in the *mhuruk-a*." How can he warn them if they don't believe in the *shed*?

"Of course not."

"Emma believes. So do the Dag Maoudi."

Malcolm snorts. "Does it really matter what they believe?"

And it's too late to begin explaining such things. He focuses his attention on Colonel Ritchie. "Have you located Frederick Whiston?"

Ritchie appears relieved to have the *Dao* trajectory of the conversation over with. "Not yet, but we're still looking."

It doesn't matter. "Do you have a car? I need to get back to the Grange."

"I don't think that's such a good idea, Ray."

"Why? You think they'll try to kill me? I'm the chosen one, remember?"

"You're the chosen one who has just made it abundantly clear that you don't place much value on their traditions, Marlowe. I know you want to get back to work, but what do you think you can accomplish? You have no cover left, you have no standing with the community. You're moving in completely hostile territory from this moment forward."

"On the contrary, Colonel. I'm only about a dozen bullets from wrapping up my mission *and* alleviating you of this nasty command albatross of the *Dao*."

Malcolm: "You're not going to save her, you know, no matter how badly she might want to be saved. She's a Whiston. There's no escaping that destiny."

Ray levers himself to his feet. "I don't believe in destiny."

Malcolm sighs. "Did you talk to Juliet like I told you?"

"Yes."

"And what did she tell you? Did she go on about how she didn't want to be the chosen one either? About how she believed they wouldn't harm her? How one day she was a bright a precocious young woman and the next she was mad, twisted, Whiston thew and bone? Did she?"

He changed my mind.

"I know what happened to her. This is different."

"They'll destroy you if you go back there, just like they destroyed her. Don't you think she believed that she

could change things also, that she could stop the *Dao*?"

She didn't know what I know, Ray thinks. She wasn't able to protect herself from the *shed*. She didn't have--

The ring. Bane of the *shed*, symbol of Solomon, infinite of contemplation.

He looks at his finger. Bare, empty, unprotected. For a moment, all he can do is gape.

But he's just like Emma, naked to harm. Emma, who he promised to protect above all.

Ray climbs to his feet, unsteady, ready to topple. "I'm going back. Now."

Ritchie rises, spreads his arms as if he's going to stop him. "Ray, come on."

But he's done with reason, done with excuses. "You should have stopped this a long time ago, Colonel. I'm just cleaning up your mess."

It's completely unfair. Ray knows all the excuses: the small outpost, the power of the Whistons, the fact that the community doesn't just tolerate it, but participates. And the *shed*, the astounding power and influence of the *shed*. But the accusation is enough; it stuns Ritchie long enough for Ray to get past him and to the top of the stairs.

With a curse and a shrug, Ritchie follows him out the door.

Over his shoulder, all the way down the stairs, he can hear Malcolm shouting after him. "You're not going to save her, Marlowe! She's a Whiston! She doesn't want to be saved!"

She returns after midnight, plodding up the stairs of her Faery Tower with a slow and steady gait. She opens the door to her private chambers, here at the very top, but does not bother with the lights, because the candles in the windows are sufficient. And he can see her for a moment, a creature of shadow, thin shoulders drooped, gown in disarray, silhouetted in the golden light from the landing. She hesitates there, leaning her full weight against the knob and the door, and he can hear her breathing, shallow and tinged with weariness. Mournful, as though she's been sobbing for hours. And he can smell her as well, not the clean vanilla scent he has come to know as hers, as her own personal aroma, but something else. Sweat, sex, a vaguely rotten and decadent tang.

He wants to speak to her in this moment, to comfort her, but he waits. Waits.

Emma moves inside and closes the door behind her. She navigates the darkness with practiced ease, following wispy trails of moonlight filtering through the windows and the guttering uncertainty of the candles, a path of silver and gold. The argent moonlight is so much like the Terran moon, almost indistinguishable, really. New Holyoke is like another Earth. Raw and fertile, teeming with life and abundance and hope. So alike, but Ray senses only the distance, the difference.

She stops near him, hardly three meters away from where he sits in the chair next to the door to her bed chamber. He's been here for hours, it seems, watching the lights of Blackheath Grange glimmer beneath the cool seaside breezes. Watching the great bonfire on the green gutter, shrink to embers, fade to black.

"I can smell you," she says quietly. "You smell like blood."

"You smell like--"

"Don't. Please, Ray. Just don't."

He sighs. "I'm sorry. That was unfair of me. I didn't come here to hurt you." You've been hurt enough.

"Are you all right? Are you...they wouldn't tell me where you'd gone."

"I needed to know that you were okay, but I thought, well, I thought that it might not be *you* when you came back here." He laughs at his own failure to communicate. There's too much to process; too many things have happened. "I just needed to see you. It is you, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"And the *mhuruk-a*?"

Emma shrugs, uncaring. "She withdraws when she's been sated. For a time, at least. Usually long enough to let me sleep, to get ready for tomorrow."

Sated. What an ugly, vicious, hateful word. "Emma, I'm trying--"

But she jerks her head away as though she doesn't want to hear him. "Did they hurt you?"

"I'm fine. I fared better than others." He should stop there, before he says something he will regret, but can't seem to let it go. "Tell me how to make sense of what I saw, Emma. Explain what happened in a way that won't make me want to vomit every time I think about it."

"It was the *Dao*. The way it's always been. For as long as I can remember."

"And no one ever complains? They just line up like lambs waiting for the slaughter?"

"They know the risk. Those who participate in the *Dao* know what can happen if they're rejected by the *mhuruk-a*. Most of them want that chance, the approval, the possibility..."

Ray nods. "They want to be the one."

"Yes, they do. They want to be Whiston, and failing that, they want to ascend to power. Perhaps not the one, but still chosen. Some years, as many as half are taken."

"And how many of them did you reject this time?"

"Not me, Ray. It's not me."

You could have spared them this offering.

"How many?"

Rasping, defeated. "All of them."

Ray hears, grunts. "Because the *mhuruk-a* was angry."

"She didn't want them. They weren't the one."

"And you? Was it good for you?"

"That's not fair, Ray. You don't know what it's like to be the vessel. It isn't like that, not dirty. Not just fucking--you said that, and you were right. I *know* them like she knows them. When we join, I mean. It *isn't* just fucking. It's feeling, knowing, being. The *mhuruk-a* measures them and what she finds is shown to me. There's a depth, an understanding, a...you can't understand."

"But I do, Emma. I've known you that way. Just you."

She withdraws from him, lowering her head in the darkness. There's nothing he can say that doesn't hurt her, it seems. "While they're inside me, Ray, I can feel what the *mhuruk-a* is thinking. Even before they release, I know what's going to happen. Who is to be chosen, and who is to be rejected. Do you think that's easy for me, to know?"

"And tonight? You knew she was going to reject them all?"

"After you'd spurned her, yes."

"You should have stopped it, Emma." He says it almost as an accusation. He's out of sorts even after the hours spent alone, completely without equilibrium. In his mind's eye, he keeps seeing her opening her arms and thighs and naked desire to strangers. Strangers doomed to die. "You should have made them stop."

She recoils from him, as though she can sense what he's thinking. It probably isn't hard. "I didn't have a choice. I'm just the vessel. Do you think I want this?"

"I don't know what you want."

Quietly, almost a whisper: "I want *you*."

"Like the *mhuruk-a*? Is that what you mean? Because I'm the one, because I'm strong, because there's something inside me that is useful to the Whiston cause?"

"Ray!" She barks his name, outraged. He's hurt her in ways he doesn't even understand.

But she, too, does not understand. He's only told her about Frederick, how Frederick killed Micah, how Frederick destroyed *Paraclete* to keep from being caught. He hasn't told her about the stolen Solomonic ring, how it came to New Holyoke, how the Dag Maoudi have spent years murdering the children of the Trust to summon *shed* for the *Dao*, to exert control over the entire world. He hasn't told her about all the blood that has been spilled to make her the vessel, just as her mother was.

How can he save her if she doesn't understand what he's saving her from?

For several moments, he sits and breathes, orienting himself in this strange new terrain. Then, as gently as he is able, he says: "Tell me, Emma. Tell me you don't care what the *mhuruk-a* wants. Tell me you don't care that I'm supposed to be the one."

"Yes! It's true, all of it. Just you."

"And tell me you'll come away with me. Anywhere but here. Run away with me."

"Now, yes. I love you, Ray. I'll do anything you want me to do. Just--"

"Just what?"

"Stop speaking to me like I disgust you. Please. I hate this; I hate everything about it. Believe me, in me."

Save me. It's there, without her speaking it, as plaintive as a wail. And he responds to it, her need, her desire. He doesn't think anymore, doesn't care, just acts. Ray is exhausted with caring about tragedies he cannot prevent. He rises from the chair, meets her in the darkness, covers her in his embrace. She clings to him, warm and soft and desperate. They touch. Finger to finger, hand to face, lips pressed together. Her flesh burns like the naked heat of a furnace, molten and radiant.

"There are things I haven't told you," he whispers into her ear. "Vital things."

But she touches her finger to his lips. "Hush."

"Emma, please."

"Not here. Come with me."

"Come with you?" He looks down at her quizzically.

And she springs away, exploiting his confusion, hiking her gown up above her knees. She dashes off, a kestrel wind.

He follows, chasing after her. Breakneck down the shaft of her tower, pursuing her, taunted by laughter light and tinkling like glass. Through the piazza, with their feet slapping against stone and echoes careening off the dour stone walls of the manor. Plunging into the house, through a wide hall, grand in appearance, then outside again. Rolling down the back slope on dew slickened grass, past the charred remains of the cottage. She is quick, lithe, a darting rabbit in a sylvan wonderland, always beyond his grasp.

He clutches at her as though she is moonbeam and shadow, his hands always returning empty.

On and on, to wall and gate and secret garden, bursting through into bowers clotted with night. More slowly, stepping off the path, ducking low slung branches and willowy saplings strangled of sunlight and nutrients by the towering, majestic oak and sycamore and winter maple.

And at last collapsing into a sea of soft petals and black stems, flowers that would be purple and pink, pale yellow daffodils and brilliant morning glory. He catches her at last, tumbles over her, bears her to the ground. She is still laughing, smiling, her eyes dancing in the light of the moon.

"Take me away," she says, happily, after she has caught her breath. "Promise that you'll take me away, just like you said."

"I will."

"Anywhere I want to go?"

"Yes."

"And you'll stay with me? You'll stay and you'll love me always?"

"Always."

This time he does not stop. Later, there will be opportunity for justice, for vengeance, for all the things he must do. Now, there is Emma, Emma who has chosen him, who has begged him to take her, love her, save her

from all that she has ever known. He thinks of nothing but her, firm and soft, precious and willing. Her arms around his neck, her lips against him. He splits the fabric of her gown along its hidden clasps, just as he saw her do before. He is rough, peeling it away like a dark and loathsome skin. There is a tangle of moments, of frenzy as he wrestles with his own clothes, making himself as vulnerable and naked as she is, hating the seconds as they pass.

She is wet, steaming, sultry.

Still damp inside with the rejected seed of dead men.

And he doesn't care. Doesn't care at all.

Because when he enters her, she catches her breath and her body ripples with a tension of muscle and anticipation that is pure joy and pleasure and acceptance. She cries out his name, over and over again. She presses her body against him, and knows that it is him, Ray, who she is taking. It is him that she wants above all. His hunger and hers are all that matters, and everything else passes away.

And when he finally releases, it is her mouth pressed against his, eyes closed, consumed by a darkness that is velvet soft and fine like sand, and a depth utterly without end. He could fall into her night forever, completely lost, completely whole.

For a pure, blinding instant, he thinks of all the things he should say to her. That he loves her. That from the beginning he's been trying to protect her. That he understands this thing, this *Dao*. That he's been equipped to understand from the beginning because of Ba'dai. That none of this is her fault, even though he has acted at times as though it was. That nothing else matters, not *shed* or murder, Lilaikens or rings, Whistons or duty, just her and him and the joy of their joining.

Frederick and his Lilaiken conspiracy can go screw themselves.

He doesn't care about *Paraclete*, about *shed*, about peril beyond his comprehension.

New Holyoke and all of frontier space can go to hell.

None of it matters. He'll turn his back on everything for her. He was made for her.

After an eternity of knowing her, feeling her, he lifts himself up, rolls of to the side. Crushes flowers beneath his weight. Finally, Ray opens his eyes.

Frederick Whiston, watching from the edges, says to him, "Now you've done it, fool."

The last thing that happens before a grim faced sergeant points you into the vicinity of combat, of a legitimate kill zone, is a whole bunch of screaming. Generally it's screaming over chopper blades, or over the descent rumble of combat drop ship, but it's carefully enunciated screaming nonetheless. Sergeants take classes in this sort of thing--how to scream clearly and use correct military diction while doing it. They lead you through a whole pantomime of slapping and clacking, patting the body and the load harness in a way vaguely reminiscent of elementary school gym class.

It inevitably starts *Boots!* Stomp. Stomp.

Tac Helmet, visor down! Slap, pull, click.

Tac Display up!

M-44 Assault Weapon locked! Clack, clatter of the cartridge advance, snip of the safety on.

Extra cartridge ration! Slap, slap, slap, all over the load harness.

And so on, from bottom to top, a final inventory of all the tactical equipment a modern soldier requires to avoid ending up on the casualty list.

These are the things Ray is thinking at this moment, running through his inventory, a pointless exercise, irony at work. Because he has none of these things, tools of his trade for as long as he can remember. He's wandered into a kill zone without even a trench knife to back him up.

He scrambles to his feet, stands there in the darkness, naked, facing Frederick Whiston. There isn't even a tree within easy reach to lend him a hefty limb he might forge into a blunt edged weapon. All he can do is stand, glower, clench his fists.

Frederick, on the other hand, came more than prepared, in dark clothes of the type typically used by men interested in sneaking about through dark spaces. And weapon in hand. Just a small piece, matte finished so the moon barely glances off its edges, but the small ones always look the most wicked when they're pointed at you because they convey the message that this is going to be personal. Not a blustery, barking gun like Marines carry, absolutely impersonal guns for which one target is as good as another, as long as they knock *somebody* down. Small weapons say: *I'm going to kill you. You. I'm going to spit metal into your vulnerable flesh, and I'm going to hang around and wait until I'm sure you've expired before moving on to the next victim.*

So he does the best he can, moving slowly, always watching the hand and the gun, trying not to hyperventilate. Trying to place himself between Emma and the likely vector of any projectiles that might come out of the barrel.

Frederick steps from the screen of foliage and into the bower, snapping twigs beneath his feet, crushing the heads of late blooming flowers. He trains the gun on them.

"I think that's far enough, Marlowe. My sister is more than capable of helping herself up. After all, she's been rising up off her back for years."

She does rise, stands beside Ray. She pulls her shoulders back, pale and defiant. "I knew you'd be back, Frederick. You're too weak to make it on your own. Just a coward; always the coward."

Let's not antagonize the gun-wielding madman, Ray thinks, but Frederick Whiston only laughs. "Yes, dear Emma, I'm the weak one. I'm the coward. That's the way it's always been, hasn't it? Because I wasn't the vessel. Too much of our father's tainted blood in me." He edges nearer, close enough that Ray can see his face, read his expression, but in the shadows, his eyes are empty, blank, dark holes punched in the alabaster mask of his face. Still too far away for Ray to do anything. "It is Emma, isn't it? Not the great *mhuruk-a*? Bringer of life, spirit of place, bitch of fortune and favor. I'm sorry, that probably isn't the proper invocation. I've forgotten the words; it's been so long since my *Dao* with you. Wait, that's right, I never had a *Dao* fuck, did I? Ours were all extra-curricular. Even in those days, I was judged the weak link in the Whiston chain."

"Stop it, Frederick!"

"I think it's a little late for you to be keeping secrets now, Emma. You have what you wanted. Despite my best efforts, you won again. I'm sorry, that's probably crass of me, but I couldn't help but overhear the cries of your

victory. What do you think, Marlowe, now that you've tasted the forbidden fruit? She fucks well, my sister. She's had enough practice."

"What do you want?" Ray demands, cognizant of the gun, trying to sound reasonable.

Frederick Whiston grins at him, a man who has gone just a little crazy. "Well, I had come back with the intention of killing you."

"Then let Emma go back to the house, and we can settle this between us."

Another laugh, and Ray realizes there's actually no note of madness in it. None at all, in fact. Just determination, savagery and a grim sense of despair. "You know, I really do admire you, Commander. I have from the beginning. Your sense of purpose, your courage, your rectitude. It never was personal, this thing between us."

"Don't make it personal now. Let Emma leave."

"You see? I even admire that about you. All of the blundering attempts I've made on your life, and it's still not your own skin that you worry about. It's all about Emma, about the innocent, about protecting others from harm. You should have listened to me at dinner, Marlowe. I tried to warn you then."

"What are you talking about?"

"I said it was for your own good. But you didn't believe. Even after last night, after the terrible things you witnessed in the cellar chamber, you did not believe." Frederick manages to look sincerely disappointed. "You've spoken with our mother by now, I assume."

"Yes."

"And still you didn't put it together? Ah, I suppose it was optimistic of me to assume that mother would remain coherent long enough to give you an adequate explanation. But that's your one great shortcoming, isn't it? You're really not very well suited to your current employment, at least not to the investigative end of it. You'd rather bumble about shooting people and breaking things."

"Oh, wait a moment, that's right! Those sorts of things are supposed to be secrets, aren't they? Commander Ray Marlowe, lately Gunny Sergeant Ray Marlowe, agent of the Criminal Investigations Unit assigned to the Goliath class cruiser *Paraclete* to interdict possible Lilaiken violence. Formerly of the Ninth Army Desert Force Marines stationed in the New Mes combat zone. Three times cited for valor in combat. Koihu, Deben Zah, Tehran. You led the charge up Wehir Taud ridge outside Vahi that salvaged the near debacle that was General Macore's southern peninsula campaign and opened the gates to Baghdad. And truth be told, you were probably *under-recognized*. At Keh, you killed thirty-four men, you personally, according to the mission reconstruction files. A flesh and blood war hero is what you are." Frederick stops there, grinning like a skull, relishing his recitation of secrets.

And Ray, Ray has been holding his breath, making himself dizzy, tasting blood. Even he has tried to forget about Keh, one of those botched hotshot lieutenant escort missions, buried beneath millions of documents, thousands of reports, denied and ignored and disastrous. Keh, which was supposed to be a Russoturk training ground for special mission bio-warfare troops trained to infiltrate the West, infect water supplies, poison lakes and streams. Keh, the intelligence said. Except it wasn't Keh. It was Kah, three hundred kilometers to the north and west. Keh was just another Russoturk village tucked inside the border of old Syria. An intelligence failure, a poorly translated communiqué intercepted from enemy satellites, an error compounded, a human rights atrocity.

It is impossible that Frederick Whiston could know these things.

But he isn't done. "And then...and then Ba'dai. After Ba'dai, you vanished. From the official record, at least. Will you tell me what occurred there, Marlowe? Or would you like me to tell you?"

Ray can't say anything at all.

"You see," Frederick says, "we haven't been exactly forthcoming with you, either. Not from the very beginning. Isn't that right, Emma?"

"No." Her voice is weary, quiet. "Stop, Frederick. Please."

"Do you hear that? She's begging me, Marlowe. She's begging me to spare you from knowledge. You're flattered. It's true love, you think, for her to want to save you from this pain. She's always been clever that way, at deception. Myself, I don't mind inflicting a little pain in the name of truth. You'd rather have the truth than a pleasant delusion, wouldn't you? I think you would."

We?

The word strikes his mind like a flinch. We?

"Emma?" he says in a voice that sounds like pleading.

She looks away. "It isn't like that, Ray."

"It isn't like that, Ray," Frederick mimics, sarcastic. "Of course it's like that. We lied to you with at least the depth, aplomb and frequency with which you thought you were lying to us. Can you believe her now? Which side of the truth, which spin on it, will she give you this time?"

"He's insane, Ray. Don't listen to him."

Frederick spins the gun toward her, frowning. "Now, Emma, up to this point, I had refrained from making personal attacks. You've put me in a position where I have a moral obligation to defend myself and my honor."

"Frederick," she says stiffly, her tone pregnant with threats. Like she's scolding a child. "Do not do this."

He ignores her. "I wonder, Marlowe, has she told you why she fled our idyllic colonial estate for the fast life of Stratiskaya Daransk? I'm certain she has. Probably something to do with the *Dao*, yes? The terrible strain of the *Dao*. It broke our mother, you know. Because she wasn't pure enough; because she was a means to an end rather than a true vessel."

Ray hears her, Juliet Whiston, inside his head. *He changed my mind*. But instead of outrage, all he feels is the sudden pressure of ominous revelation rising in his throat. Suffocating.

Frederick is done laughing, mocking them. The gravity of his demeanor only makes it worse. "You know it's all lies, don't you? Everything you've been told about the *Dao* is a lie."

"I know about the *mhuruk-a*," Ray responds. *I know about the shed*.

"Yes, you met one of them at Ba'dai, under different circumstances. The first time, at least. But that *Dao*, so barbaric, so primal, tricky to understand, really. It's interesting as a cultural artifact. We've been practicing it

for years, for whole centuries together, my family. We learned it from the Dag Maoudi, of course, as we learned so many other things. They taught us to touch the *mhuruk-a*, to draw upon her essence, to feed on her. To give her offerings of blood that would sate her hunger, keep her fat and willing and bound to us through rites so ancient their source has been forgotten. She who resides within the Stone. In return, she made us powerful, destroyed our enemies, just as she had once done for the Dag Maoudi before they became weak. That's why she was brought to us. Stolen by elements who wanted to revive the old ways, who had vision beyond a simple island.

"What the Dag Maoudi were, we attempted to become, at least for a time, before we too became fat, indolent. Poor stewards of the Stone. What do you think of the *Dao* now that you've seen it, Mr. Marlowe?"

"I think it's a lousy way to control your population," Ray says, slow and careful. He suspects it is what Frederick wants to hear. "And an even more screwed up way to abuse your children."

"Then you've missed the entire point. You've mistaken the trappings and rites for meaning, shadows for substance. That's what you get when you go to the disgruntled tabloid muckrakers for information. For all of the anonymous Trust children murdered, all of the *Dao* sacrifices to the insatiable mouth of the *mhuruk-a*, it has never been just about the shedding of blood."

Frederick bares his teeth. Not a smile, but something feral. "What you've been told is that the *Dao* exists in order for us to channel the *mhuruk-a*, the daemon, the ancient spirit of the Dag Maoudi Stone. In channeling the *mhuruk-a*, we bind the community together, both to one to another, and the collective to ourselves. But it wears on the vessel, this bottling of the eternal and the sublime in human form. Is any of this sounding familiar to you?"

"What sounds familiar is the part where you let this stupidity ruin your mother's life, and now you'll do the same to Emma unless someone stops you."

"Yes, yes. That's exactly what you were made to believe. And it's true, after a fashion, I suppose. But only in part. The rest of the story is about us, our family, the long years of neglect and failure. How we bred ourselves carelessly, and not in the ways instructed by the Dag Maoudi. How we neglected the duties that were expected of us, so that the spirit departed from us--at least, as far as the Stone would allow. How with each year that passed, each taint added to the bloodline, the touch of the *mhuruk-a* became more distant, more difficult, so that there was no communion."

Frederick fixes him with a stern expression, the hooded glare of a predator stalking through tall grass. "Where there is no communion with the *mhuruk-a*, other rites must be brought to bear. She is mighty, Marlowe. You know this as well as we do. Her power to build, influence, destroy is beyond comprehension. The Whiston empire was built on the strong back of the *mhuruk-a* of the Dag Maoudi. It was founded on the true purpose of the *Dao*.

"These are difficult things to explain, you see? There is a sprawling gulf between the past and the present. In out time, for all the gifts the spirit gives, it takes its bounty in return. Not only in blood, as you have seen, but also in strength from the vessel, if the vessel is weak. Humanity is not constructed to suffer possession lightly, and our mother was weak, faulty, poorly built. Father and the Dag Maoudi recognized her raw potential, but they had to make her strong enough if she was to be the vessel they intended. There were surgeries, drugs, rites and rituals both modern and ancient designed to simulate the chemistry that was lacking. They had to shape her mind to bear the unbearable, in the hope that he would pass to her, this modified vessel, the remnant of the Whiston glory. Alas, his firstborn, his only son, was an imperfect creation. So he tried harder with his daughter.

"He realized that it was not just the vessel that was flawed, but himself as well. The true Whiston essence was

too many generations removed, too diluted. So there were physicians, genetic specialists, trained in the arts and lore of the Dag Maoudi, and they tampered and spliced, made the necessary adjustments, reversed the damage wrought by all those generations of imperfect breeding in his very genetic structure. It was too much. He couldn't endure the testing, and it destroyed him. But before he was lost, he succeeded in part. He suffered the *mhuruk-a* as a vessel. A truly horrid and abominable vessel, indeed. Cracked and misshapen, his flesh bulbous and running with sores from radiation, his cells wracked by mutation. Monstrous, he mounted our mother during the *Dao*; monstrous, he summoned glory; monstrous, he channeled all our lost might into his seed.

"And together they made Emma in the image of her forbearers. Mother's genetic raw materials coupled with father's, all the impurities and faulty, diluted genetic tags removed. Together they made the perfect vessel, attuned to the will and way of the *mhuruk-a*. Emma was supposed to be the pinnacle of Whiston accomplishment. A pure vessel, yes, but not only for communication as others had been, but one who hearkened back to the distant past, to the ancient Dag Maoudi, who could *commune* and harness the might of the *mhuruk-a* without the shedding of blood."

"And yet you kept on killing," Ray says, almost growling.

"We have forgotten much. Not just we, but the Dag Maoudi who taught us, who once embraced the *mhuruk-a* as genius, guide, mother. They had counted themselves as surrogates to the eternal because they had learned to construct themselves naturally--through genetic selection, mating vessel to *Dao* offspring, mind to like mind--until their whole race echoed the being and thought and will of the spirit. Until they bound the *mhuruk-a* to themselves, and themselves to the Stone, so that it made them strong.

"Amah will tell you that in those ancient days, they walked in the darkness of the spirit and knew no fear. But even by the time our great ancestors discovered the Dag Maoudi, that glory had all passed away. They were a people in decline, who clung to their gods, trapped them in stone, manipulated them with ritual and blood. The glory that was transferred to the Whistons in those days was the nadir of the Dag Maoudi, after they had already begun to forget. They taught us to shape our minds, to recognize the signs of other minds like our own, to mate in ways that would make us strong, like the Dag Maoudi had been. The process was long, arduous, ultimately flawed. We could never rise above the need for blood.

"Grandfather Fram saw the truth, after the Whiston Corporation was wrested from his control. He saw that we had become weak, and that the only way to reverse that course was to begin again in a new place, following the old ways as well as they could be remembered. A world of our own, where we could become great once more, without interference. Our father believed he had accomplished what his father had not, that he had made the perfect vessel. But he was wrong. The vessel alone does not suffice. Even the perfect vessel does not commune.

"My sister would have you believe that she ran off because she didn't want to go mad. She didn't want to be destroyed as our mother was destroyed. That was her first lie, Marlowe. She is the perfect vessel, in form and mind, immune to the depredations of the *mhuruk-a*. She went to Stratiskaya Daransk because she was told to go. Because the *mhuruk-a* said that you would be there, and because she whispered to the Dag Maoudi that you are the one."

Frederick wants to go on, Ray can feel it, his vicious glee, but Emma stops him. She shakes her head, hard like a shout of denial, like spasm. "It wasn't like that. It wasn't. Ray--"

She grabs his arm, turns him, forces Ray to look down at her. "Not like that, Ray, whatever he says. Whatever he thinks he knows, it's wrong. She showed me, that much is true. She showed you to me, how you were made for me. How I was made for you."

But Ray backs away from her, from both of them. Thinking about Nomar, the way his binary code, his fundamental systems had been altered from contemplating the *shed*. Thinking about Juliet Whiston whose mind had been changed. About vessels male and female. And Juliet's calm, firm assertion that *Frederick does what he believes is right*.

There's something wrong here, a subtlety, a lie that he senses, but can't put his finger on.

How many people would you be willing to sacrifice to have Emma all to yourself, Marlowe?

She showed you to me, how you were made for me. How I was made for you.

What he's being told isn't enough. It doesn't explain *Paraclete*, *Gorgon*, Micah, the stolen ring and rending *shed*. It doesn't tell him why they pursued him from the beginning, or why Frederick has tried to kill him since.

Emma reaches for him again. "Ray."

"What do you want from me?"

It's Frederick who answers him. "I want my birthright, Marlowe. I want what you've stolen from me."

"Your birthright?"

"They would have taken it away from me in time. Spurned me because I'm weak, because there wasn't enough of my father in me, enough Whiston to make me worthy of the name. The Dag Maoudi rejected me from birth. But there was still hope until they found you, because even a weak link was better than no link at all. They'd created a barrier for themselves, you see. By making Emma perfect, they made perfection a requirement. They needed another just like her to take the last step away from rites of bloodshed. The *mhuruk-a* would accept nothing less. It is my birthright she would have given you."

Horror, tingling like the taste of copper in his mouth. "You destroyed *Paraclete* to stop me from coming here?"

"I've committed many sins in your name, to prevent you or to drive you away. But you were too stupid, too resilient, too blinded. But not for selfishness, not just to save my birthright. I want you to understand that. I'm not an evil man, Marlowe, despite my failings."

It's there. He's almost touching it. "Then why?"

"Because you are the one. Because you can commune with the *mhuruk-a*, just as Emma can. You are created in the spirit's image. The *mhuruk-a* flows in your blood."

Frederick pauses, angry, betrayed. "And through your seed."

Unthinking, as if unnoticed, Emma's small hands touch her stomach, a cover of protection. Ray stares at her.

"Now you understand," Frederick says, bitter, his tone as dry and wasted as the desert winds. "For centuries, the *mhuruk-a* has been just a tool to us, something we could control with enough blood, enough murder. We needed it, and we detested it. But there was no other way to touch her fathomless power. As we became known, as we amassed our fortune, it became complicated to practice the *Dao* in secret. We already had our empire, and it was decided that in order to protect what we had already gained, we should allow the *Dao* to falter. We turned our back on the source of our might, and we saw our fortune wasted, our power and the

things we had built wrested from our control by malcontents.

"We believed it was because we had failed in our diligence. But Grandfather knew differently, that it wasn't just us. It was the *mhuruk-a* also. Bound for so long without communion, the tether between us grew thin and tenuous. Without communion, the spirit faded. Without the spirit, the family failed. He returned us to the old ways, to blood and ritual and sacrifice to bind the spirit to us again and revive our waning strength.

"You've changed all of that. Emma is the vessel; you are the one. But your child will be another thing entirely, a creature human in form but *mhuruk-a* in spirit. One of them, a new race of being, heir to the fundamental power of the universe, able to create or destroy at will, able to commune with not just the *mhuruk-a* in the Stone, but with all the *mhuruk-i*. Without the *Dao* and without mediation. Not a child at all, you see, but one step beneath a god. A Whiston god to raise us up, destroy our enemies, give all of human space into our hands. Do you see what you have wrought? Your seed will open the door to chaos through which the *mhuruk-a* and all her kind will enter and devour us all."

But Ray shakes his head, denies it all. "No."

Except Emma had placed her hands over her belly, where their child would grow.

It isn't enough. It's all speculation, fantasy, rationalization for the things Frederick has done. But it doesn't explain anything.

"There never were any Lilaikens. It was just you, from the very beginning."

He does what he believes is right.

"Do you suppose they're aggrieved by the things that have been done in their name? I wonder sometimes. It's hardly fair that they should be the ones who suffer for our crimes."

"Our."

"The Whistons and the Dag Maoudi." Frederick bows his head slightly, a figure of penitence. "Don't you understand? Even Grandfather Fram was deceived. He believed that the Dag Maoudi would be faithful to his vision and destiny. But before we existed, the Dag Maoudi were. They owned their world from horizon to horizon through their communion with the *mhuruk-a*. They cast themselves with us because we were an avenue to power again, a way in which they might reverse their course, possess a larger world. Through us, they sought to regain their dominance in a vaster arena. But the weakened Stone couldn't grapple with a world so wide and complicated, especially as we faltered. It could only influence, and even that waned with time. But New Holyoke...ah, New Holyoke was new, fresh, simple. It could be designed with amenable elements from the start. All the Dag Maoudi needed was to revive the Stone with a new network of communion. Grandfather believed that the *mhuruk-a*, given free reign to choose those who would lead with us and beneath us, would return us to power. It's why he built the Trust, to attract other minds, potential genetic and intellectual raw materials who could be manipulated, bred, trained in the way of the vessel to become those with whom the Stone could communicate. One generation after another, each a step forward toward perfection, toward Emma and the child she would bear. The whole colony has been built for this purpose, Marlowe, for you to come and give the perfect vessel a child who would break down the walls between us and the *mhuruk-a*. Can you comprehend it? All for the sake of power. Nothing but power."

"But he was wrong," Ray says.

"They were all wrong. The *mhuruk-a* in the Stone was just a shadow of itself. After so much neglect, there is not enough blood in the universe to bind her fully to their will again. She resents us because we compel her,

but do not commune."

"So you brought more of the *mhuruk-i* to New Holyoke."

"Yes. A new spirit for the Stone, young and strong and malleable, as in the days of old."

Archons of strife was what Jack Holcomb had called them. "You don't know what you've done."

"Oh, I know exactly what the Dag Maoudi have done, Marlowe. They have lied to us from the start, made us believe that their will was to serve the Whiston destiny. Perhaps that was true once, but no longer. Now, they've determined that they wish to rule again, and Amah believes they can control the revitalized Stone through your child. The Dag Maoudi have waited centuries to enslave all of us to the will of the *mhuruk-i*, and they no longer have need of the Whistons to further their goals, thanks to you and the ease with which you walked the path they set before you.

Frederick surprises him by scowling. "And I'm just as guilty, because I *watched*. I watched as they dismissed me as weak, drunken, failed Frederick Whiston, whom the *mhuruk-a* had rejected. I watched them claim the container bearing the *mhuruk-i* from the deserts of Terra to replenish the weakness of the one they had trapped in the Stone. I watched them destroy *Fortitude*, and claim responsibility in the name of the Lilaikens. I watched them send the *mhuruk-i* against other ships--your friends and colleagues. Why? Both because the *mhuruk-i* told them that those actions would bring you to Stratiskaya Daransk, and because attacks on the FSA would foment insurrection on the frontier. Colonial independence will create a vacuum of political authority in which they may solidify their grip on power here after the child is born. With the child to drive the Stone, and the *mhuruk-i* to enforce their will, the Dag Maoudi can rule the frontier. Knowing this, I still sat by and let them do exactly as they wanted--until they found you, that is, when it became obvious that they would spurn me in your favor. That changed everything.

"Can't you see? From that moment, there was no birthright left for me. There was no future, because the Dag Maoudi would destroy the Whistons just as they destroyed everything else. I had no weapons to prevent them. My dear friend Townshend Wright has sought to deprive me of Whelemtat, robbing me of my economic influence. My sister has become the vessel I do not have the ability to be, by which means I might have stirred the Stone against them. The Dag Maoudi have determined to replace me, heir of my father, with you--my seed with your seed--so that the vessel would be beyond my control.

"I am not weak, Marlowe. I have been methodically stripped of my power. They only believe I am weak, though I studied the same lore as the Dag Maoudi who despise me. Though I was able to steal from the Terran ring *mhuruk-i* of my own, who could be persuaded to do my bidding. Though I could lay the foundations of my own plans in darkness and secrecy.

"But even the theft of my birthright I could have borne. I would have allowed you to usurp my place in the Whiston line if it would have been just a reclamation of our family glory. But it's not. I cannot countenance the Dag Maoudi treachery. I cannot endure an entire world under the domination of the *mhuruk-a*. Next to that, my birthright is meaningless. Evil. Better that the Whiston name be completely erased from memory than allow the Dag Maoudi to open the gates through which the *mhuruk-i* could enter our universe unfettered. That is what I have attempted to do, Commander Marlowe. I murdered Micah, one of our own children, to bind the *mhuruk-i* that I carried aboard the ship to me. I called them, held them in readiness, and when I was certain of you, that you were the one, I did all that was within my power to dissuade you."

Ray stares at him. "You left the body in the storage area because you wanted it to be found."

"I instructed the *mhuruk-a* to place the body in the open. I hoped it would warn you off. Given your history, given Ba'dai, it should have been sufficient. You should have seen that you were being manipulated from the

start."

He had, of course, but had failed to understand. All of his conclusions had been wrong.

"But you were too stubborn or foolish. I waited as long as I could, until it became obvious that you would persist until you had mated with my sister and unleashed hell on New Holyoke. I had no other choice. Only then did I send them forth. Against my sister. Against the Dag Maoudi. Against you. To destroy everyone and everything that could make this future come to pass. But you survived. You survived to ruin us all."

Frederick lifts the gun at him, squeezes it in his hand. "I did all of these terrible things, but you are to blame, Marlowe. It's all because of you."

And even then, Ray tears his eyes away from the gun, from death. To Emma. This is too much for him; too much to grasp. All he requires is that she deny it. Just tell him one more time that Frederick is insane, and he'll believe her. He wants to believe her.

"Emma?" Her name passes his lips like a plea.

But she says nothing. She isn't even looking at him, but at the ground, and her lips curve in a private, secret smile. Her fingers caress the soft skin of her stomach, as though she can feel, see, experience the cells dividing within her.

"But why me?" Ray asks, whispering.

"Because you are the one."

"Why? Why me!"

Frederick shrugs. "Who knows? Who cares? If the *Dao* has taught you anything, it should be that the *mhuruk-i* have their own ways that are beyond our reckoning. In you, they've found something essential."

He does what he believes is right.

To destroy everyone and everything.

"What are you going to do with Emma after you kill me?"

He gives Ray a small, cold frown, like a child on the verge of tears. "What makes you believe that I have any interest in killing *you* now? You've become irrelevant. Killing you doesn't prevent anything."

The gun slides away from him in a slow and ponderous arc--away from him and toward Emma. He watches it turn aside forever, unable to breathe.

No!

Frederick Whiston says, "I should have done this a long time ago, Emma. But I *was* weak. I let myself love you. I loved you more than anyone, and you should have been mine. Just you and me, the way father intended."

Ray, too far away, too stunned to be thinking clearly, lunges for him or just into the path of the bullet itself, he doesn't know which.

And Emma's head turns to the sound of her brother's voice. She glares at him, fists clenched, eyes locked, and wails a high and keening note. She erupts with energy, a frisson of invisible, blistering flame. And the note she screams is a word; the word is a hammer, unspeakable, flung with the force of a galaxy caught, compressed, sucked into the pinpoint eye of a singularity.

Ray feels it blow past him, echoing thunder as it splits the air. He is brushed aside, a being of no consequence, battered to the ground. He lands flat on the grass, smothering in flowers, beside the pool of waxy flesh that was, until a moment ago, Frederick Whiston.

Behind him, Emma speaks with the voice of the *shed*, "Rejoice, brother! The vessel has accepted the seed of your child."

It's enough to make him scream. He doesn't somehow. He lays still, his nostrils full of the odor of Frederick's steaming remains, his evacuated bowels, his damp and bloody bonelessness. He lays still and lets his heartbeat and adrenaline thunder in his ears until the surge of panic passes.

Eventually, he rises and collects his clothing.

Emma, watching, says to him, "I'm pregnant with your child."

Full of wonder, of awe, of pleasure, like a young bride to her husband. Abandoned once again by the *mhuruk-a*. Emma alone. She reaches for him in the darkness, as though her brother isn't dead a small distance away, wanting to share this moment, this joy with him. He knows this scenario, has seen it played out on vids, in movies, his entire life. It's a choreographed moment in which he's supposed to smile, appear a bit dazed, then as it sinks in on him, he should grab her and swing her through the air, laughing--and just as quickly set her down again, his rough hands on her belly, terrified that he might have hurt the baby with his exuberance while she assures him everything is fine. That is the proscribed event protocol.

But Ray only stares at her with an expression that feels like horror until she withdraws again.

"There's a great deal that should still be explained to you," she says finally, "so that you understand. Things won't be so different than they are now. Most people won't even notice that things have changed. And if they do, they might even be happier for it. There won't be any more need for blood, for the *Dao*."

He already understands. Understanding is where the emptiness has come from. "How much of this did you know?"

"It's complicated, Ray."

"How much did you know?"

"He twisted things. It's not like he said, and he would have gone on twisting things, destroying everything we've attempted to accomplish." She clenches her fists, pulls herself up, straight and proud and rigid. "I'm glad he's dead. I'm glad the *mhuruk-a* killed him. He's done terrible things to me, to others, and what he would have done here would have been worse. In time, you'll come to see that."

"How *much*, Emma?" Ray thunders.

She blanches, stunned by his harshness. For a time, all she can do is look at him, quivering with anger or tears. All Ray can feel is heat, the molten, volcanic flood of betrayal. Slowly, Emma collects her gown--the *Dao* robe--drapes it about her shoulders, but does not fasten the clasps. As if she's daring him to forget what they have done.

"Take me home," she says.

"You can find your own goddamned way home."

She doesn't rise to his challenge, only nods. "That you've chosen to believe my brother changes nothing. It doesn't change who you are, what we are. You'll learn that eventually."

She leaves him, passes close enough for him to touch, then goes on, vanishing into the trees. Ray watches her depart, but where she goes, he does not follow.

Chapter Nine

Later, afterward, the Whiston comm hub, a space he knows. Maybe not this one as much as spaces like it, comfortable places surrounded by logic and energy and possibility. Racks of comm array synchronization servers, lights green and red, amber status displays blinking, flipping characters. The hum of exhaust fans and heat sink exchanges. The smell of ionized electronic discharge, as crisp and pungent as autumn leaves. It's warm down here, improperly vented with so many terminals and links and passive monitor machines crowded floor to ceiling, sucking up the best efforts of the HVAC units.

And still he smells her on his skin, remembers the feel of her, firm and warm and groping. Remembering makes him feel thick, stupid. Makes his jaws ache from grinding his teeth.

Memory has driven Ray here, in the middle of the night with the door locked behind him and a chair propped beneath the knob. Because he's out of answers, out of leads, out of his league, frankly. So much has been destroyed, so much more is about to change. It has to change, starting in the morning, as soon as word begins to spread that Frederick is dead, that Emma is bearing Ray's child. If he doesn't get some reliable guidance or some conceptualization of truth that doesn't skitter away when the perspective changes, he's going to scream until his skull explodes. Even now, with everything collapsing about him, he still has work to do.

That is what a comm hub is--a place of answers, a temple of information. A haven where mistakes can be deleted with a few taps on the keypad, where a simple system wipe creates a clean slate for everybody. A virtual landscape full of potential where failure has no consequences.

How much did you know?

How much!

All of it.

He has been blind and manipulated from the start, from the moment he set foot on *Paraclete*. From the moment she approached him outside the plush and elegant doors of Madame Trusseau's theater. While he was hunting Lilaikens, Emma was hunting him.

She showed you to me, how you were made for me. How I was made for you.

But this is supposed to make him feel better somehow. Competent. The tedious, technical mental exercise of aligning satellites and relay beacons, of hacking the broadcast array up on the Port Authority station and embedding a rogue signal, of confusing their bandwidth security agents with chaff, red herrings, a maze of misdirection.

It's all games; nothing like the real world.

Ray studies the process of beacons linking one to another across impenetrable space, imagining the wave of his signal crashing back along network, routed through accelerators, through folded space and pin sized wormholes. Data shredded, blasted, gathered and reassembled, all in real time and at the speed of light.

He doesn't even know what day it is on Terra. He's lost track of everything. And he doesn't care.

The screen image flickers, splashes from spinux signature blue to starfield black, to a complex governmental seal, some weird variant of the FSA rocket and hanging moons, that blips away before he can study it. An anonymous, monotone automated routing system demands his passcode id, verifies his status, shunts him along the comm tree. Finally, the gray walls of an anonymous office, shadowed and red tinged by late

afternoon sunlight filtering through windows he cannot see.

And Jack Holcomb, seated, waiting. He's probably been waiting for days, expecting this.

"Frederick Whiston is dead," Ray says. He doesn't have the energy for a proper salutation.

Holcomb hunches toward the screen, squinting. There's no camera, no vid signal. Ray is just a disembodied voice to him. "Marlowe?"

"Yes."

Holcomb brightens at once, his body language relaxes like a sigh of relief. He's in shirt sleeves, without his tie, out of uniform. It must be Saturday or Sunday. Ray has never imagined Jack as the type of FSA company drone who would come in on his days off. He hasn't imagined him as anything but a ball-busting jerk.

"I must say it is a pleasure to hear from you. After the reports began filtering in about the *Paraclete* disaster, I was afraid we'd lost you. The news feeds set us straight quickly enough, of course. And that EED Colonel out there...what was his name...well, he was kind enough to report through official channels that you had arrived safely, and with the Whistons about you, no less." Holcomb chuckles at this, amused. "It seems you found those Lilaikens a bit more troublesome than you initially assessed."

There are no Lilaikens, not then, not now, but Ray doesn't feel like explaining it. It's too much clogged and tangled minutiae, threads of a tapestry that only fit if you can step back and examine the whole picture in detail. He doesn't have the desire to even begin explaining.

And he doubts Holcomb would even care.

"Frederick Whiston is dead," he says again.

"Yes, I heard you the first time." A distracted, nuisance shake of the head. "Terrible."

"You don't sound like you think it's terrible."

"I assumed you killed him. If you killed him, it must have been necessary within the parameters of your mission, so it can't be any great loss." Holcomb taps a few keys on the pad in front of him. His mouth pops open, surprised. "Ray! You're running on an open line. Hold on while I reverse encrypt this signal. What could you have been thinking?"

"Screw your encryption, Jack."

Holcomb tenses, but completes the encryption process. When he's finished, he presses himself back in his chair, adopts a pose that is casual, thoughtful, bemused. "What's the matter? You only talk this way when you believe you've made a mess of things."

"Why did you send me here?"

Holcomb furrows his brow, confused. "You know your mission objective. I've made your priorities more than clear, I think."

"Why me?" Jack is just being obtuse. Ray can sense it, like they're playing a game of wits.

"Because of your unique experience. No one else is as qualified to deal with these particular sorts of

complications. That should be obvious to you, especially given the complications that arose on *Paraclete*."

Ever the spook, Jack doesn't even trust Agency encryption. He has to come at everything widdershins, occluding his knowledge of any fact that could tie he and Ray and the mission together. Ray is exhausted with spycraft.

"You're a liar."

Jack Holcomb hears him, grins, nods. "Have you recovered the artifact?"

"I didn't kill Frederick Whiston. The *shed* killed him. He destroyed *Paraclete*, and the *shed* killed him. He was trying to stop me from coming here, and I think you know why."

"Ray, you're not answering the questions I'm asking. It's very difficult to communicate with you if we're going to be speaking at cross purposes."

"And you haven't told me the truth. Not from the very start. Why me, Jack? Why did you send me here? You had no other intention but that I should end up planetside with the Whistons."

"What makes you think that, Ray?"

"Everyone else seems to have known I would be coming here. And because I know you. You're a liar and you're sneaky, and you don't give a shit about withholding critical information from your assets if you believe it's in your best interest, just like Ba'dai. I'm telling you now that keeping secrets is no longer in the best interest of this mission. I need to know why you sent me. Me personally, Jack."

For a moment, Ray doesn't think he's going to answer, that Holcomb will just cut the connection and abandon him here, without answers. But Jack presses his lips together, frowning, thoughtful, like this is something he's been dreading for a long time.

At last, he says, "It was inevitable."

"Inevitable?"

"The Whistons cannot cast a net so wide without attracting some attention, no matter how clandestinely they believe they're operating. We keep close tabs on our field agents, even while providing you with the necessary independence to improvise. And when inquiries ripple along the intelligence net about one of ours, we watch those developments closely. The Whistons were determined to make contact with you at some point. At least this way, we sent you on our terms rather than someone else's."

"Nobody bothered to explain those terms to me. I guess I missed that memo."

"It was a calculated gamble, Ray. We didn't just throw you out there unprepared. If we hadn't had faith in your abilities--each and every one of us, I mean, all the way to the top of the Agency--if we hadn't believed you could do this job, we would have brought you in a long time ago."

"You've been planning this for years."

"To be factually correct, we've been grooming you for years, yes. We didn't know where you would be useful until Frederick Whiston began to blunder about pumping his contacts for classified information, and then the stolen artifact ended up on New Holyoke, and--well, one doesn't need to be a savant to recognize the emergence of revelatory patterns. This shouldn't come as a surprise to you, of course. You're an asset. You

bring certain skills and abilities to the job just like every other agent in the field, and we utilize those abilities in the way most likely to achieve the desired results."

He's still lying. Sins of omission. "Why me?" Why am I the one?

"Because the Whistons selected you."

"The *shed* selected me."

A slight roll of the shoulders, a barely perceptible acknowledgement. "That too."

"Jack!"

"Let me see, if I have my calculations correct, you should be in the middle of the much fabled *Dao Maed Vitouri* there, yes? Correlating that fact with what you've already told me about the untimely demise of Frederick Whiston, I can assume that you've been paid quite the compliment." Holcomb offers him a sly, knowing grin. "Have you done it, then? Have you agreed to become the next resource in the grand Whiston genetic experiment?"

Ray blinks at the screen, neglects to breathe. He doesn't answer because there are no words.

"Emma Whiston is quite an attractive proposal package, I imagine. Certainly, you would find her so, practically irresistible. That's why I used the term 'inevitable' before, you understand. Not only were the *shed* were determined that this should happen, I think, but Emma as well. That is a devastating combination."

"You've known about this all along."

"We've known about the Whiston link with the *shed* via the Dag Maoudi for some time, yes. We knew what Fram was doing when he revived the tradition of the *Dao* on New Holyoke. It was clear that something would have to be done eventually, but as long as they seemed to be achieving only minor success in their development of adequate vessels, we were content to wait for them to make their opening move. Then Ba'dai happened, the ring was stolen, the inquiries after you came to our attention. The picture began to clarify itself. So I sent you, hoping that at least this way, you would have a chance to choose rather than becoming the victim of their manipulation."

"Not from yours, of course."

"If I had wanted to manipulate you, I would have given you more information to work with in the first place. I let you find your own answers just so I could *not* be accused of manipulation, even if providing you with some of that data would have greatly assisted you in this process. We recruited you after Ba'dai specifically so you could be prepared for a situation like this. Maybe we didn't know the specifics, but we knew enough about the *shed* to understand that any sort of recognition they might display toward you was significant. It meant that they or their agents would have plans for you at some point in the future."

"You should have told me the truth, Jack."

"What truth is that, Ray? That the *shed* wanted you to mate with Emma Whiston? Not someone else, but you. Only you." Holcomb laughs. "Without having experienced it, you wouldn't have believed me."

"But I would have at least known."

"And knowing, you would have mistaken your usual mission protocol for a valid response. You would have

rounded up all the Whistons you could find and executed them before we could learn *anything* at all about their intentions. You're a very good agent, Ray, when it comes to containing threats to universal peace, but I'm afraid you're not the most perceptive of men in more open-ended scenarios. The solution to every intelligence problem is not always to pop unwanted holes into your opponents' foreheads. Certainly not when those opponents have as elevated a profile as the Whiston family in a time during which the FSA already has its hands full combating an image of military thuggery on the frontier. You've made considerable strides in your time with us, my friend, but you will always be in your truest and deepest of hearts a combat Marine."

He's right, of course, and even though the calculated obfuscations still want to make Ray reach through his screen and pull Jack's spine out through his nostrils, at least he understands. He accepts the rationale if not the execution.

But if what Jack tells him is true, then they have been leading him at least since Ba'dai. Or was that even the beginning of it? If the *shed* could exert enough influence to keep the New Mes zone at war, how hard would it be to put an intelligence branch LT and a grumpy Gunny Sergeant together in such a way that Ba'dai would result? In such a way, in other words, that Ray would be exposed to the *shed*, recruited by the CIU, enabled to slide from one assignment to the next in such a way that he would end up on his way to *Paraclete*, to frontier space, to *inevitable* contact with the Whistons?

These are things he should have been thinking about.

These are questions he should have asked years ago.

Should have, but years ago, he didn't want to know the answers. He still doesn't, but now he's out of choices, out of options. Now he has to ask and comprehend. "Jack, why didn't the *shed* kill me at Ba'dai? Everyone who was undefended except me."

"Instead, it called you *brother*."

"Why?"

Holcomb places his elbows on the desk and presses his fingers together. What Ray thinks of as a Long Haul pose. "It's hard, Ray, both for me to tell you and for you to hear. Complex, and I'm not sure you'll like what I have to tell you. And you'll never be able to un-hear it. Knowledge will change everything."

"You haven't seen the mess created by my not knowing, yet."

"And you haven't even touched the fringes of the mess you've created, my friend. Don't get ahead of yourself."

"Please, Jack. Just tell me."

"Answer one question for me first. Is Emma carrying your child?"

"Yes."

Holcomb closes his eyes for a moment, nods sharply, makes his decision. "All right, then. You've set the events in motion one way or the other. You've chosen based on who you are rather than what you know, or what you might have thought you knew. That's the critical point. What I can clarify for you are the possible consequences of that choice, so you can determine your next steps accordingly. Are we clear?"

"Yes," Ray says, but he's thinking: *Not at all*.

"Do you remember what I told you about the *shed*, about what they are? Where they came from?"

"You said they were created by the Ialdabaoth. That they were supernatural beings."

"Actually, I said they were *like* supernatural beings when compared to humans, in terms of their capabilities. That's a valuable distinction for you to keep in mind. That they were 'created' according to the Gnostic record makes them natural by definition. If they were truly supernatural, we would be helpless against them. The *shed* are a different order of being, potent enough to pose considerable challenges in containing them, strange enough by our reckoning to be completely alien to our understanding. But it is only in their non-supernaturality, so to speak, that we have any hope."

"You're talking about weaknesses. Ways in which they can be killed."

"Not really, no."

"Do I need to remind you what they're capable of? They've already destroyed four EED ships."

Holcomb holds up a finger to correct him. "They have been the mechanism for the destruction of four EED ships, Marlowe. They did not supply the intent. Finding ways to counter their considerable strength may be something we'll undertake in the near future--that's something that you'll have to decide."

"Fine."

"If we presuppose that the *shed* are natural beings, evolved along a different track than humans, with different abilities and separate modes of interacting with the physical universe than ours, it follows to some extent that they are mortal entities. They have at least a form of corporeality, of biological systems. They are flesh and blood of a sort, yes?"

Ray remembers squeezing off a score of rounds at point blank range into the torso of the *shed*, and watching them have no effect. "Of a radically different sort, I guess."

Holcomb understands, smiles. "I'll accept your stipulation of degree as long as you yield the general truth of my premise. If an entity is biological, we can assume that it also possesses internal structures not inconsistent with those we see in familiar complex biological systems--organs, blood, cells, DNA, reproductive systems."

"Jack, we're not talking about some highly advanced form of *Homo profundis* here. We're talking about the biological equivalent of tactical plasma bombs in the hands of hostile forces."

"Yes and no. In the past, you've fixated on my description of the *shed* as neutral memes, abstractions rather than realities. I don't think we've communicated the complete concept adequately. When I say it, I mean that the *shed* are neither antagonistic nor benevolent towards us. They are entities with certain characteristics which make them amenable to a certain amount of manipulation by outside forces which may impinge on their ability to carry out their own particular desires. But it is not, as you seem to understand it, the concept of an empty data set waiting for nefarious individuals to populate the space between the parentheses with violence. The idea of the neutral meme is only accurate insofar as it describes the normal state of human to *shed* relations, which has historically been one of either ignorance or exploitation."

"Exploitation?"

"How else would you characterize a relationship in which humans summon *shed* in order to carry out their own designs? *Shed* as tool, as weapon, as agent of another's will is exploitation by definition."

Ray shakes his head, though Holcomb can't see it. "You obviously haven't witnessed the Dag Maoudi *Dao Maed Vitouri*."

"Not in its current incarnation, no. But I have managed to track down accounts, both recent and previous to the Whiston migration to New Holyoke--though as you might imagine, the Whiston's were a bit more discreet about the particulars back then. The *Dao* has a tremendous bearing on our discussion."

"That's something of an understatement, given the circumstances."

"I told you it was a complex question. What I'm trying to accomplish, Ray, is a de-mystification of the *shed* for you. We've talked in Gnostic terms until now, which might have been a mistake, but the Gnostics--their cosmogony as developed in the Bar Ka'heli codices, I mean--really had the best grasp on this material. Mikhail Brezhnaya leaned heavily upon those traditions, and I thought that having experienced what we did together, it would help you make sense of what you had seen."

Only an academic would consider Gnosticism as a reasonable route to demystifying anything. Ray says, "Get on with it."

"Right. Well, in that context, we've spoken of rituals for influencing the *sheds*' behavior by focusing on them as neutral memes. Historically, this has been done through the agency of sacrifice, of blood. What I would ask now, given that we can also recognize the *shed* as biological entities, is what purpose the blood serves, and what the introduction of blood into the process means about the nature of this alien being. What is the natural mechanism, in other words, that proceeds from the colineation of *shed* and human blood that allows us to generate predictable patterns in the behavior and activity of this radically different strain of being? What is it about blood that makes all of this possible?"

"I don't know, Jack."

Holcomb shrugs. "Neither did I, not at first. See, because I insisted on thinking of the *shed* like you do, things to be prodded, poked, figured out and studied for weaknesses. I thought that if we were able to acquire a *shed* for proper scientific study, as it were, this would become apparent. I didn't even know if such a thing would be possible given *their* ability to influence human thought and behavior, not to mention that interesting little thing they do with the dissolution of human skeletal material. That type of reasoning was a mistake."

"You can't kill them if you don't know what makes them tick." It's something Ray feels obligated to point out.

"That's what I'm talking about. There is an interesting psychological phenomenon among humans, largely post-Enlightenment, to assume that there is an intellectual or moral evolution occurs over time. We believe we're better equipped than our forebearers to ascertain Truth because we have acquired more knowledge or understanding. More facts. Thus, we say that they were superstitious, whereas we are rational. They believed in magick; we have discredited magick in the name of science. We grapple with our limited understanding and proclaim ourselves wise--in the process, discounting the wisdom of the past and the culture from which it emerged as criminally unenlightened. What I would posit is that magick, superstition, ritual and science, theory, the vaunted scientific method--all of these are nothing more than metaphors for acquiring comprehension. The metaphors we use explain some phenomenon well, and others not so well. Sometimes we would be better suited to step outside the currently accepted metaphor or paradigm.

"This is largely what I've done by discussing the *shed* in Gnostic language--terms that would be considered anathema to observers who have not had the direct experience of the *shed*. Because the *shed* make more sense to us on a mystical and superstitious level. It is the only way in which we can begin to understand them given our present level of knowledge about them, about xenology, about the way in which the universe itself functions.

"But from the Gnostic perspective, I can examine the ritual interactions with the *shed*, and from the proscriptions of ritual, I can infer certain things about the nature of the *shed*, about their fascination with blood and rings, their strengths and vulnerabilities, and about the types of things they seek as a species. Not only what it is they can do, but what it is that they want and think and feel when operating outside the influence of human exploitation. Understand, ritual is not superstition, Ray. It is symbolic language. The acts carried out in ritual behavior are codifications of principles and facts established through the painstaking study and understanding of observable phenomenon. The ritual may not explain why the principles exist--it doesn't aim to illuminate the mechanism--but it most certainly does describe what works in a given situation. Ritual is a map to the terrain of an undiscovered country.

"So, I observe from ritual itself, like the Dag Maoudi *Dao*, and reports of ritual recorded in the past that an effective route for interacting successfully with the *shed* is the spilling of blood. Not just the blood itself, but the willing, sacrificial shedding of blood. Yet, you and I have both observed that nothing happens to the blood that is offered. It is not absorbed into the being of the *shed*. It is not transmogrified into some other substance which the *shed* seems to find useful. The blood itself seems to have no physical value whatsoever."

"So what's the point?" Ray asks.

"Exactly. What is the point of Brezhnaya's martyrs, or the *Dao*'s victims, of little Micah Uytdehaage?" Holcomb muses over this, his eyes alight with fascination. "And what if I tell you that there is no point? The blood serves no actual purpose except as a form of currency. What if I said that the only reason that the blood has any efficacy, is because we value it so highly? We know the meaning of blood, that the offering of it is an extreme and costly measure, reserved for the greatest of exigencies. Then, the meaning of the blood changes. It is not valuable except as a conduit of intention. It is communication of desire."

Ray snorts at him. "Sure. And we've gone around killing our own kids and folks from our communities because rats and pigs and cows were too valuable to waste, is that it?"

Holcomb pauses, a pained expression on his face. "That may be precisely what I mean. The *shed* neither ask for nor require blood. But it is meaningful to us, to humans, and the more sentient the bearer of the blood to be spilled, the more beloved, the more psychologically valuable it becomes."

It is not a perspective Ray is prepared to appreciate with Jack's level of detachment. He shakes his head unhappily and invites Jack to continue.

"Look, the ritualistic shedding of blood as offering is thematic in the human perception of reality. Thematic and ubiquitous. It is a recognition of 'nature red in tooth and claw'. Both human and animal sacrifice have been documented in almost all known cultures as a method for interacting with divinities, or forces perceived as divinities. It is the first expression of all religious impulses. *Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness, yes? The blood is the life. This is my body broken for you. This is my blood, shed for the remission of sins. Do so in remembrance of me.* Blood is communication. Blood is communion with the supernatural. It is the symbolic elevation of human consciousness above the level of the mundane. It is the passcode into rarified planes of existence. Blood is willingness to sacrifice and to be sacrificed to the will of another, greater being, and representative of an agreement to give one's self over to another standard, another code of behavior, a different thought paradigm.

"This is what claims the attention of the *shed*. Blood as metaphor for desire to enter into dialogue, into a relationship. This is also not without precedent. As a good Midwestern boy, you will recognize a reference to Abraham, the Hebrew patriarch. What was he asked to do? To shed the blood of his only son, Isaac, the child of promise. It was not the blood that Yahweh desired, but the willingness to sacrifice, to reaffirm the Covenant. Or even better, God, after the Christians had made him over, sent his son to shed his blood for human redemption from sin, as a bridge between man and divine and a conduit through which the two could

communicate. These things you have been taught, I assume. These things Ahriman knew when he wrote about the *shed*. He had emerged from a culture in which actual sacrifice was still a staple of religious thought, just as legitimate and accepted as depositing your tithe of jingling coins in the collection plate, but which was still understood as both physical act and symbol of intent to either maintain an existing relationship or to establish a new one.

"Sacrifice is a transaction. It is the individual saying to the divine, I will do this thing at great emotional or financial cost, and in return, you will behave in a fashion that is predictable to me. An equally binding agreement, Ray. A contract. In the absence of sacrifice, of blood, of obedience to this imperative, both the individual and the divine are released from obligation to behave in patterns which are exclusively beneficial to themselves.

"So, sacrifice is obedience to an agreement. It is a show of good faith. Obedience, in turn, is based on thought, reflection, recognition of positive consequences to the establishment of this relationship. As a byproduct of cognition, then, obedience as a pattern of behavior stems from connections made within the brain. Connections are synaptic hardwiring, which is biological. Thus, in order to achieve obedience and a plane of consciousness in which one may interact with the divine, the individual must change the physical structure of the brain. What I'm trying to say is that devoutness is not a nebulous moral concept. It is physical, biological. The synaptic networks of the obedient are similar; their brains are wired in the same sorts of ways. And the hardwiring reinforces the likelihood of certain patterns of behavior leading to additional obedience by closing off the existential potential to behave in ways that run contrary to the pattern of obedience. Obedience changes us. Structurally, neurally. It makes us different than we otherwise would have been. And it is only through this structural change, this biological adaptation, that we are able to commune in meaningful, reciprocal ways with the divine. We become like them. We become able to receive their communication without the conduit of ritual because we are more like them than we are like other human beings.

"This was the message of the Biblical Jesus, was it not? It is not blood that allows us to touch the mind of God--thus, the shedding of his blood as a final and perfect sacrifice for all men in all times--but a symbolic, continual sacrifice of obedience that would engender the rewiring of synaptic connections within our own brains that would give us access to communication with a different order of beings which we had hitherto considered as divinities. Be ye transformed, as the Apostle Paul put it, by the renewing of your minds."

"You're talking about a form of symbiosis."

"A very specific form, yes. A neural compatibility. That's why I stressed that they must be, in one way or another, corporeal. They have minds that operate somewhat like our own. They have will and intention and the ability to communicate with like minds."

"What does this have to do with me?"

Holcomb sighs. "Everything."

"Tell me how."

"Do you remember that I once told you that the word *shed* means 'adversary'? That this is how people formerly understood the idea of demons and angels, as neither good nor evil, but instruments of divine will?"

"I remember."

"And now I've told you that the *shed* are biological, living entities. Creatures like us, and with whom we have coexisted for millennia, though we have been largely unaware of them."

"Except they caused wars, strife, violence. Their influence, even when unmolested, has never been positive."

"But it has been adversarial in the manner I described. The *shed* push us. They push us in a way that seems antagonistic. But is it in the same way that an influenza inoculation seems antagonistic to a young child who knows nothing of disease? I told you once that Ialdabaoth created the *shed* in repentance, for crafting a world founded on duality, for forming humanity. He made the *shed* to destroy us or usurp us and regain his right standing with the Godhead. Except that once he is done, he realizes to his horror that in the meantime, God has given his imprimatur of legitimacy to mankind through the divine spark. Ahriman tells us that Ialdabaoth realizes his error and takes the *shed* again, alters them, reproduces them by the hundreds, the thousands, and fashions them as adversaries to elevate humanity's imperfect existence. He conceives the *shed* no longer as antagonists, but as instruments of divine will to goad us to a higher plane of being above the mud and muck and depravity of our base natures. Look, we're speaking in the language of religion, because that was the only language Ahriman had to describe what he knew. It was the language Jesus had to understand his experience. They were describing a phenomenon outside the realm of human experience and attempting to give us a way to relate to it."

"So what are *you* saying?"

"When you observe a *shed*, what do you see? Something like a man, yes? Large, of course, powerfully constructed, but also aesthetically pleasing. A figure that inspires awe on a deep and primitive level."

"Yes," Ray agrees, too slowly.

"And?"

"It's difficult to describe. It's like an afterimage of lightning. Something else behind the *shed*, but inside it at the same time. Something different. With tentacles, eyes."

Holcomb nods. "Alien."

"Yes, alien."

"I know, Ray. I've seen it. The apparent body is not the actual one. It is rather a projection of expectation--a form the *shed* assumes for our benefit." Holcomb pauses, thoughtful, chewing his lip. "Why do you suppose it would do such a thing?"

"Because it doesn't want us to see it as it really is."

"Or because it is aware of our bias against the unfamiliar. Perhaps the *shed* projects the corporeality it does to make us comfortable in its presence."

"And why would it do that, Jack?"

"Don't you know? Hasn't the *mhuruk-a* of the Dag Maoudi told you?"

"Because it wants to commune with us."

"Commune, Ray. Not communicate, I think. That's why it pushes us, because we don't commune. That is why the *shed* are adversaries. They're seeking a way to commune with us, to share their minds and thoughts and advanced knowledge with us. Not because they wish us harm, but because we are backward, destructive, evolutionarily stunted. We have wired our brains for war, for taking, for isolation and obtaining resources to satisfy the demands of our individual bodies. War and strife, call them what you will, they are ultimately an

evolutionary mechanism. War thins the genetic herd. It promotes the survival of certain traits, certain genes, certain capabilities. War directly influences evolutionary development by insuring the survival and propagation of specific genetic types. The weak are eliminated; the strong survive, reproduce. Left to themselves, the *shed* subtly influence our evolutionary direction by pruning away the genetic predispositions that are not compatible with their ultimate goal."

"Which is?"

"They seek to inoculate us against our own natures, as it were. The *shed* want to elevate humanity, to move us away from a culture of exploitation to one of brotherhood. Exploitation of ourselves, of them for our own ends."

"Are you telling me they just want to get along?"

"No. I'm telling you that they're attempting to provoke us to *change*, Ray. To sacrifice our way of being in order to become something else, something they perceive as better. They would say to us that we could, if we choose, if we heed them, evolve to become like them. Ageless, enlightened, with the very structure of the universe opened up to our direct control. And not just our control in an egomaniacal sense, but from a new perspective, with new insights, new understandings within a great community of enlightened beings. In the context of *shed*-consciousness, everything changes in ways we do not have the language or the ability to describe, possibly to even conceive. It is the becoming of something completely alien to what we are now, and the embracing of our citizenship in the greater order of beings. A completely post-human experience."

"You make that sound like it's a good thing, Jack."

"You don't think so? Or are you confusing the intent of the *shed* with the intent of those who would exploit the *shed*?"

Ray frowns, uncertain of what to think. "Tell that to Emma. Tell her what a pleasant experience it is to be invaded by the *shed*."

"Emma already knows, Ray. She is the vessel. She has already been changed. She was genetically constructed to emulate neural patterns with which and through which the *shed* could communicate. Just like you."

For a moment that seems eternal, those final words hang in the air, echo inside Ray's skull. He has a sudden and suffocating experience of a balloon inflating inside his mind, filling him with pressure and emptiness.

Just like you.

"Why would you say that?"

She showed you to me, how you were made for me. How I was made for you.

Jack Holcomb takes a breath, gathers himself. "You asked me why the *shed* at Ba'dai didn't kill you. You asked me why I sent you to New Holyoke. My answer to you was that it was inevitable, because it is the will of the *shed*. Because the two of you are the same, Ray. I told you that the *shed* are creatures. Not spirits, not gods. How do I know that? Because I've read it in the most convincing of all sacred texts--in the biological text of the human genome. Of your genome. Your DNA profile was as revelatory as the vision of any Biblical prophet. I've pored over it for hours, studying chains of amino acids that no human eye has ever beheld. And I've run hours uncounted of simulations designed to estimate the physical, cellular, neural changes this type of genetic encoding would produce. All of those simulations have been compared to detailed Choi Diagrams of your actual neural structure, and in turn against the vast neurological profiling databases at Stanford, Tokyo,

Helsinki. And what I have learned, Ray, is that you are unique. Unique within the context of the entire human community, wetwired differently, perhaps, than any man who has ever lived. You have neural-cognitive patterns that we can't even begin to decipher. They form a matrix of synaptic waves that are unprecedented, alive with baselines and cognitive-net conglomerations we've never seen."

"No," Ray whispers. "No."

You are the one.

Holcomb doesn't bother with his protest. "And for years, I've asked myself, what does this mean? How did it happen? Did the *shed* somehow seed it into you, tamper with your development while you were still in the womb? Is it some form of spontaneous mutation? I don't know, Ray. I don't know, and I don't even particularly care. But it's clear that you are something other, something set apart from the biological community of men. The aberrations in your DNA affected the structure of your brain, the way you think and perceive. They call you *brother* because they recognize you as one of their own, with a mind genetically structured to resemble theirs, with synaptic patterns that are compatible. To them, you are *shed*, one with whom they may commune. And through communion, they finally, after all these eons, see the opportunity to actualize the dream they've had from the beginning, the vision Ahriman only dimly perceived.

"You constitute an evolutionary leap. Your genes, released into an amenable pool, could birth an entirely new species of man who could operate in a neurally symbiotic relationship between us and the *shed*. Which is precisely what the Whistons have striven to become for all these years with all of their eugenic tampering and surgical procedures, their drugs and Dag Maoudi rituals. You are naturally what they have sought to become medically, mechanically. Fram Whiston went to New Holyoke with the intention of cramming generations of eugenic neural predisposition and biological tampering into the smallest time frame possible, seeking both a way to enter into communion with the *shed* and a mechanism for controlling them.

"I said you were unique, but that's not precisely true. You are unique in nature. Emma Whiston is a construction from that same mold. She is scientifically unique, as it were. Your genetic counterpart. The *shed* perceived the perfection of the match between Emma and you, and they knew also that your offspring would be a different being all together. Your child is poised to inherit a genetically predisposed neural structure that is completely compatible with the neural structure of the *shed*. Not marginally, like you and Emma, not something merely good enough, but a true hybrid being. A new creation, a living, biological metaphor for *intention*, human in form and *shed* in consciousness, heir to the glories of both races."

Ray tells himself that it's more lies, more fantasies. Holcomb is assembling a structure of argument that has no foundation except illusion. Impossible to be believed. Because if he chooses to accept it as fact, it follows that everything else must change, basic assumptions he has made about himself, his reality, his experience. Once you accept certain basic concepts, Holcomb had once told him, once you add an acceptance of the supernatural to your reality, the universe becomes a different place. The old rules cease to apply. You are transformed--you, your perception, because the universe itself is as it has always been.

But he can't accept this. He is not what Holcomb claims. He is not *shed*.

Except...

You are the one. The Dag Maoudi have known it. Emma knows it. Even her *mhuruk-a* has told him so. Everyone has accepted it as fact except him. Everything that has happened proceeds from that assumption, and to deny it is to make all the suffering and sacrifice and murder meaningless, a case of mistaken identity.

They have obligated him to accept this burden, to accept their reality and their definition as his own. Anything else is selfishness.

You are the one.

"You sent me here for this?" Ray demands, choking. You sent me here to destroy me?

"No. I sent you so you could choose."

"Choose?"

"Whether you would accept or reject the future the *shed* have chosen to offer us. After all of this time and struggle, sacrifice and exploitation and misunderstanding, your child leads us all to a cusp. Will we commune, follow, become, or will we turn away and go back to what we have always known." Holcomb stops there, considers Ray gently but implacably over the vast kilometers of space. "It is not fair that you should bear this burden alone, Ray. You would not, left to yourself, choose to be the arbiter of humanity's destiny. But it is your destiny nonetheless. The *shed* have selected you to make the decision for us all."

"I can't make a decision like that, Jack." He should be outraged, savage, but he doesn't have the capacity for it. There have been too many lies for him to feel anything but a grinding sort of exhaustion.

"You're the only one who can make it, Ray. You're the only one who is qualified. The only one who really has the capacity to understand the complexity of the offer that has been tendered. You're the only one who can see both sides, *shed* and human, with equal clarity. That's why we sent you to New Holyoke. We knew you would evaluate, perceive, judge. And in the end, you'll have to decide whether or not you will willingly open the door to a new stage of human evolution beyond our reckoning."

"And what am I supposed to do?"

"Do as you've been trained. Assess the situation. Evaluate whether the intended effect is good or evil in your estimation. If it is a threat, eliminate the principals."

"That's a comfort, Jack."

Holcomb laughs. "Either way, I will be most interested in reading your post-action report."

"You'll be lucky if I even bother to come home."

"You have to come home, Ray."

"Why is that?"

"Because even though I was horribly rude in neglecting to pass along my congratulations, as the expectant father, you still owe me a fine cigar."

Chapter Ten

By dawn, he is exhausted, dazed with fatigue, dizzy with knowledge. He is a creature emerging from the dank night of a cave into the blinding light of spring, of day, of awareness. He feels himself unrecognizable, a temporary resident of his own body--a body he has ignored and mistreated beyond all endurance. Sleepless, hungry, pressed from crisis to crisis over the last several days without relief. He feels excoriated by fire until only the essential elements of himself remain.

You are the one, they say to him, but he doesn't know. He doesn't sense it, feel it; he can't grasp the concept in his mind in any way that has meaning. There are no handles on this amorphous wad of knowledge by which he might hold it and examine it. It just is. A perfect existential dilemma.

And if he is the one, it is more than anything else a statement of responsibility.

So Ray does what he has always done when confronted with the impossible or the unthinkable or the impenetrable. He locates his room, changes his clothes, loads his weapon and tucks it in his pants. He splashes cold water on his face, brushes his teeth. Afterward, he rambles about the twisting corridors of the manor house until he finds the kitchen, and he eats what he can find.

He takes care of his body. It is the only thing left to him, the only thing that he can trust without reservation.

There are other things he should do. Colonel Ritchie deserves to know about Frederick Whiston. EED should officially be informed about the culpability of the Dag Maoudi in the attacks on *Hegemony*, *Asp*, *Gorgon*. He has all manner of backtracking and explaining to do, misdirections and outright lies to clear up, any one of them sufficient to shatter what might be left of his professional career.

But it's just details. Everything but body and knowledge is irrelevant.

Then he finds an out of the way room where he won't be found, with a door that locks, and he sleeps until nightfall, readying himself for the coming hours of the *Dao*.

In the late evening, with the sun dipping behind the trees and the expanse of stars unfurling over the uncharted continent behind him, Ray breaks into the Whiston garage and takes the splendid Manchiti Spider once again. He has left behind an empty house, silent and dark, except for the light in Juliet Whiston's window. He wonders if she has been told about the death of her only son, if she'll be up into the night mourning him because no one else will. Before and below are the lights of Blackheath Grange, the lamps and lanterns strung on wires, the gay and festive flowering vines, the bonfire rekindled on the green. Over the growl of the car's engine, he can't hear if the people of New Holyoke have gathered to chant again.

Somewhere in that sea of humanity, Emma wanders the streets, seeking neural structures of which the *shed* might approve. Bonding with them, taking them into herself, marking them for gods and men with a seal of approval. The thought of it fills him with an ache in his chest like loneliness, like the same way his breath catches in his throat whenever he sees her.

Ray stops himself there, pushes it away. He has not come here to save Emma Whiston.

He takes the road into the city, not hurrying. He parks in the lot near the park, where he and Emma left the car before and jogs the rest of the way. The streets are largely deserted. On the way, he passes closed shops with lamps in the windows, locked doors, empty houses. Once or twice, he detects the faint thrum of music in buildings as he goes by. Not the rhythmic chant of the *Dao*, New Holyokan hymns, but canned, modern

music, the warble and thump of popular tunes from those who do not adhere to the ancient ways, who don't care about the *mhuruk-a*. Townshend Wright, plotting the overthrow of the Whiston financial cabal, is probably doing the same. Listening to pleasant New Orleans jazz while he grunts and heaves his way inside Ms. Roswell's pretty, pleated skirt, and she closes her eyes, wishing there were other ways to ascend the Whelemat corporate ladder. Thomas Malcolm is probably doing much the same, without music and sexual attendant, but working nonetheless and gnawing his old bone of bitterness against the Whistons. They were both right in their own ways, as correct in their estimation of what was really going on as they were wrong. Everyone has pieces, symbols without context.

No one has enough to actually believe.

Nearer the green, he begins to encounter the city's missing inhabitants. Groups of two or three, mostly young men, milling about on street corners, who start nervously and crane their necks at the sound of his approaching footfalls. Yearning for the *mhuruk-a*, unaware that the deck has already been stacked against them, that they would have been just as likely to share the bounty of the *Dao* if they'd waited at home, shut up in their rooms.

Because none of them really believe, either. He can see that now. Not in the *Dao*, or in the *mhuruk-a*. It's just a quaint legend used as an excuse for a public holiday. The possibility of the supernatural does not impinge on their understanding of reality. It's all just a titillating ritual, like church on Sunday where people just like them sit in pews, hearing but not believing, listening to outraged evangelists harangue them with lists of sins and foibles and sexual deviances which they imagine just long enough to condemn.

And if a little blood is spilled each year during the celebration? Well, that had never stopped the Romans from having a good time, either.

He enters the green from the street, now having to pick his way through the gathered crowd. Not nearly so many as the previous night, and most of them stand in groups brimming with smiles and friendly chatter, drinking tea and lemonade, leaning against the buildings. Occasionally, he catches a snatch of conversation that seems relevant to him, but only obliquely. *Jon heard that she's over on Severn, near the jewelry shops. There was almost a riot along the Chancon because she was there for almost an hour and selected no one. Can you believe it? Do you ever remember her selecting no one?*

Toward the tump, the press thickens, and he has to push his way through, not bothering to mutter apologies as he passes. Some, though not many, recognize him from last night. They shout or curse at him, possibly even try to follow, but Ray tucks himself into the crowd and vanishes from their sight. Finally, he locates the steps carved into the back side of the hill and makes his way up to the bonfire, to the stage, to the stele and the altar. He is the only one up here, treading on sacred ground, it seems, and by the time he reaches the stone dais, a curious alternating buzz and shush has fallen over the gathering.

In their voices, he can hear recognition as it jumps from lips to ears, the sweeping wave of a small gestalt. They watch him, and he ignores them in turn. No one hinders what it is he's doing, and he imagines himself, frowning, severe, haunted, as fatalistic as an Old Testament prophet.

Jack Holcomb has said to him: *you'll have to decide whether or not you will willingly open the door to a new stage of human evolution beyond our reckoning*. Assess, judge, determine. But there's no one he can believe; no one without bias. The Dag Maoudi would rule the world. The citizens of New Holyoke don't have the faith to know one way or the other. The adherents to the *Dao* see only personal gain. Even the *mhuruk-a* is bound by blood and stele and exploitation.

That's why he's come here, to this place. He wants them to see and believe. It's time they were shown the truth.

Ray reaches into his pocket and removes the ring Nomar carried away from *Paraclete*. It trembles in his hand, radiating heat, beating like the heart of a wild beast, shimmering with quicksilver. He holds it between the fingers of both hands, the way a priest clutches the communion waver.

This is my body, broken for you.

Just a small thing, a ring of meteoric stone, brittle. And standing midway between altar and stele, warmed by the furnace heat of the bonfire, he snaps it in two.

There is silence that seems to last forever.

And from a great distance, deeper and colder than the vast emptiness of space, he hears the cry. First one, approaching, dopplered in his ears like a wail. Then another, sharp and gleeful, like a sudden intake of breath resonating about an empty room. The great bonfire rises up with a roar, the flames lick twenty meters into the sky as a pillar of fire. And in the next instant, the edifice collapses with a whumping, flattening sound, snuffed of life. In its place is smoke and darkness and startled screams.

But there are still lamps in the windows, flickering candles, the newly dawned and brazen moon overhead, and Ray peers into the shadows, into the smoke, into the eyes of the *shed* he has released from captivity. It is tall, beautiful, glorious in its perfection and the fine crafting of its limbs. The projected form, idealized man, is all that he can see in this light. And even though he is the one who released it, the *shed* still terrifies him, blisters his nerves with raw and electrifying power. His knees would buckle if he let them.

But he can feel his audience too, their riveted attention and held breath. It's for them that he's dared this, at least in part. They deserve to know what their fealty has purchased since the days when Fram Whiston still walked the streets of a rough and tumble mining city. *Do you see? Do you see what it means?* He should be screaming at them.

Instead, he says, "Well met, brother."

The *shed* says nothing, only stands and waits. Suspicious of the ring, or another one just like it.

"Do you know me?" Ray asks.

Ponderously, gravely, the *shed* answers. "I know you. You are known to us." It pauses, sucking the salt and sea breeze into its nostrils, and Ray senses something else in the action. Not just breath, but data, knowledge. "You have planted the seed that grows within the vessel; the seed that will be your hope. You have become the one."

"And do you know what I am?"

"You are one with whom we may commune."

"Am I one of you?"

Even the *shed* seems to find this question curious. "You are like us, but not like us."

Just like Jack said. "I don't know what that means."

"You will learn. We may teach you, if you seek knowledge. We would teach all of you. We would lead you to rise."

So simple, so emphatic, as though the *shed* has no memory of their past. Maybe it doesn't. Maybe it emerges from the ring with no consciousness of the things it has been instructed to do when under the geas of blood.

Ray says, "You tried to kill me once."

The *shed* narrows its eyes. "I must do as I have been bidden, and by the blood which binds. That is the ancient law."

"That doesn't change anything. You tried to kill me. And you did kill most of the people who were important to me. How am I supposed to believe that you want anything but harm?"

"We desire that you should rise."

"That's not good enough."

The *shed* regards him quizzically. "I do not understand. You are the one, and you have called me from captivity. Do you not wish to commune?"

"Not until you can prove you bring something to the table other than blood. Because you've already taken from me my share of sacrifices, my friends. You owe me. You want communion? Fine. I'm telling you that there can be no communion if all you promise is death and pain and suffering."

"We do not wish that you should suffer. We do not wish harm on those with whom we might commune. Only joy, and knowledge."

"Fuck that."

The *shed* stiffens, confused. "The apprehension of knowledge is not without pain. To become is to cast off that which was, just as the future destroys the past. These things are known to you. Great sacrifice has been your portion."

And as it speaks, a window opens in Ray's mind. Images, sensations, remembrances flood into the open space, each one pure and crystalline in clarity, shards of memory with the weight of reality. Kilgore, Rodriguez, Nomar. The buckling explosion of *Paraclete's* final moment. Becker expelled into the void, blown on currents of force through a rent in the hull, flash frozen as he gulps like a fish, rotates in balletic swirls.

Ray jerks his head away. "No more sacrifice. That's what I'm saying. The *Dao* has already spilled too much blood. You don't need it, and these people don't have any more to give, so if you want to teach them to rise, you're going to have to find another way."

"Man gains no knowledge without blood," the *shed* answers, but it is quiet, rumbling, as though spoken through a throat choked with grief. "It is the way of their kind."

"Then teach us another way, but no longer with blood. The time for that is past. Nobody believes in blood anymore."

Do you see? Do you understand? Any one of you?

The *shed* nods, mulls, as though weighing what Ray has said against a feather of truth. "What do you seek from me, brother?"

Answers, for all of New Holyoke. Knowledge. "Do you know the people who call themselves the Dag

Maoudi?"

"They are known to us," the *shed* rumbles, bristling with a livid and ancient hostility. "We have been constrained to do much that we would not do in their name. But they have been clever, and have fenced themselves off from retribution."

"They're a blight, a cancer. They only seek to exploit and deceive you, and to enslave the people around them."

"Indeed, they do not seek to commune, and they do not seek to rise." The tang of elemental power leaking from the *shed* changes, sharpens into a feeling like betrayal, as bitter and clogging as asphyxiation. "They drive those of us whom they possess to purposes that are not our own."

"And the other one like you, the one they call the *mhuruk-a*, where is it now?"

"My kindred is with the vessel."

"Where?"

"Certain ones of the Dag Maoudi have sensed that you released me from captivity, and they have taken the vessel to their temple in the rock, because they fear what you have done and what it is you will do to thwart them. In fear, they would bid us do great evil."

Another image crosses the gap between them, a glimpse of dark, subterranean places. Blood and screams. The *shed* shows him all he needs to know.

The sensory impact is vicious, stunning. Ray gasps. "Is that happening now?"

"Would you raise your will against them, to stop them from doing this thing? You alone?"

"I told you, no more blood. No more exploitation."

Anticipating, the *shed* asks, "And what would you have me do?"

"You can deal with the rest of the Dag Maoudi. Instruct them in the ways of knowledge, so that this one dies with them." For *Hegemony, Asp, Gorgon*. But his glare is hard, murderous. "Teach them to rise in whatever way suits you."

A grin, taut and vulpine, but also taunting. "The time for blood is past."

"This isn't about blood. It's vengeance. Justice. That should be something you can understand."

For a moment, barely perceived, the *shed's* eyes flick toward the stele, trace the lines of its concentric and interlocking circles, then swing away, blanched and wincing. Ray watches it, sensing, knowing. *But they have been clever, and have fenced themselves off from retribution.* He steps to the stele, ancient volcanic stone, carved and worn like the walls of a prison cell.

He places his hands against the cool and porous stone, feels it. It is brittle like the ring.

Shoves.

The stele tips, tumbles, falls from the stage. Crashes against the base of the statue, *Promise and Will*. Shatters.

Someone in the assembled audience cries out in outrage, but it is a lone voice. The rest observe in silence.

Ray turns his head, meets the gaze of the *shed*. "Do you understand?"

The *shed* smiles wider, ebon teeth behind dark lips. "Yes. This I can understand." It presses its hands together and bows to him. "I will do this thing, brother, if you will it to be so. Kiri-ya!"

"I will it," Ray says, scowling. "Kiri-ya, brother."

And with a sound like laughter and a mighty rush of wind, the *shed* pops out of existence.

Did you see?

Chapter Eleven

He races through the city at night, down streets and alleys all but deserted, encountering only rare clusters of celebrants, listless and confused, abandoned by the presence of the *mhuruk-a*. Always forward, guided by the light tipped spire of the Whelemat complex. He chases its image against the cliffs and the night sky like a beacon. When he arrives, he skirts the steel and glass structures of the new buildings, plunging through decorative gardens, along concrete walkways, scaling chain link fences until he reaches the old industrial park. There's little light here, and he slows his pace. He's surrounded by the raw bones of New Holyoke here, the resurrected past. Cold, sterile stone and utilitarian roads grated from building to building, rutted and potholed. Mountains of gray slag and gravel, pits delved into the rock with walls that plunge off at right angles into pools of black and brackish water.

Searching, scanning, peering. He approaches the flat outer wall of the abandoned main mining station. It towers above him, half the height of the cliffs, like a medieval turret. Except there's a door at the base, light aluminum that reflects the moon, that squawks on uncoiled hinges as it's pushed by the breeze.

He goes inside, where it's completely dark. Dark and silent and crowded with menace, with flanged steel and great cogwheels, whirling blades and crunching rollers spiked with stone rending teeth. He can sense the weight and density of the massive ore extracting machines hanging above him, idle and hungry.

He's been here before, this virtual space at least, chasing hostile *shed* through an industrial night.

This time, at least, he remembered to bring a flashlight.

Ray advances quickly now, down a broad corridor between the curve of dusted and dingy hoppers, great holding tanks for fresh ore trundled along conveyer belts that emerge from a darkness at the far end and branch off at sharp angles, then slope upward to hang from the ceiling like spiderwebs. At the mouth of the mine shaft, he stops briefly to collect his gun.

Echoes of language, garbled chants, rise up to him, faint like the buzz of insect wings against his ears.

And screams. Sharp, bitter, suddenly truncated.

In fear, they would bid us do great evil.

He plunges in, down the shaft worn flat and even by a thousand miners' feet tramping back and forth to work, to labor, to the glorious future of their colonial home. He ducks his head beneath the suspended track of the conveyer belt, beneath shadows that leap out at him from the odd contours of the walls, specters raised by the wild and skittering beam of his flashlight. The odor of damp stone and sweat and past explosives linger in the air. And beneath that is something else, coppery, viscous, gagging.

As he draws near, he can hear their chants and the stomp and slap of their feet above the sound of his own footfalls and his own panting. He has to pause at a junction of tunnels, craning his neck, casting for echoes. Right turn, and he's off again, always wending downward. A hundred meters, another junction, down again, until he seems to feel the entire weight of the planet hanging over his head.

The tunnel ceases to descend, runs straight and narrow for a short space, and at the end is light, bright and yellow, and the stone carved doorway into a chamber. Ray charges toward it, pursued by screams that hang fresh and murderous in the thick, subterranean air.

He races to the light.

To the light, and through, it seems, some wormhole in space and time. Into the past. Into the desert. Back to the place where it all began.

Ba'dai.

He scuds to a halt on the lip of a chamber lit by guttering torches, shaped into a circle, vaulted like a dome. The lectern of bedrock, the ranks of worshippers kneeling; the full score of them slapping their hands against the floor in staccato rhythm, counterpoint to the chant; the bound victims laid out in troughs next to the great stone ring. The narrow trenches descending from trough to ring, stained dark with blood.

Just like Ba'dai.

Only this time, the sacrifices are orphans, children of the Trust.

This time, they shriek and struggle as they are laid beneath the knife.

This time, the ones wielding the blades have held their sacrifices down, and grinning with savagery, plunged their trowels, cast their offerings, then called for fresh meat. The blood is everywhere, and the eviscerated bodies, used and cast aside, are a charnel heap of limbs and crimson cloth, empty, glistening eyes and wide, rictus-frozen mouths.

And this time, Ray is alone.

He grips the butt of his pistol, but there aren't enough bullets in the world to cleanse this chamber of its horror. And not nearly enough for the Dag Maoudi gathered here. All the aged and ancient ones who have served the Whistons for decades, who have cleaved to the old ways and grown weary of subservience, are here. Fulfilling their destiny.

Too many.

From the lectern, Amah cries the chant to summon the *shed*, and to peel back the binding force of the ring.

Sha-oa con kiri ton! Mhuruk-a tala miri-ya! Kiri-ya!

She is ecstatic with sacrifice, transcendent with the shedding of blood, her head thrown back and arms cast wide, palms splayed above her head. The Dag Maoudi answer with voice and slap. The knives flash, rise and fall, as efficient as a grain thresher. And distant, like the rumble of far-off thunder, the *shed* called by blood answer. Not one, but legions without number.

A legion who rise, and as they ascend, think nothing about communion. Only about blood.

And between lectern and ring is Emma, *mhuruk-a* and vessel, glassy, rigid, silent.

Beside her, inside the ring, the shimmering, quicksilver swirls, the fundamental essence of the *shed* accelerate to a dizzying pace. The swirl becomes a haze of opalescence, and in the haze, another universe opens up like a blank and staring eye, a vortex of impenetrable stellar emptiness that gusts with alien winds and ravaging physical forces beyond knowledge, from which emerges a hand, an arm--teeth and mouth and throat shouting with a ferocity of lust that shivers the stone walls.

In this maelstrom of chant and roar, resounding echo and emerging chaos, Ray weighs options that do not exist, not when each passing moment is a cry and a flash of knives. There are no adequate plans for situations like this; no choices but bad ones.

He just acts, aims and fires, curses as he squeezes the trigger again and again. Because he's ruining everything, because with the first blast and recoil, the Dag Maoudi start to move and scatter, and it takes too many shots to drop his targets as they flee. And because responsibility has bound him as cruelly and efficiently as a Solomonic ring to kill the child murderers first, all seven of them, though there are willing hands waiting to take their place. A dozen willing hands. But them first, if only to stop the slaughter for a little while, while he works out something better.

He watches Amah, matriarch, root of the Dag Maoudi on New Holyoke, duck behind the lectern, unassailable.

He counts down the shots in his magazine until only two shells remain, and then he stops.

Most of him, the sane part, could go on killing them forever. But he has no other choice, because the *shed* continue to rise.

In the howling and confusion, the scrambling away and rush for cover by the Dag Maoudi, the screams of the bound and terrorized children who remain, Ray sprints across the open floor of the chamber, over the troughs slick with blood, past the corpses of Trust children. To Emma, who he has promised to protect. Emma who has known what the Dag Maoudi intended all along. Emma who carries within her the seed of his child and the glowering presence of the *mhuruk-a*.

Emma, who has lied to him, manipulated him, betrayed him from the start.

Amah, exultant, growls through the din. "You are too late, Mr. Marlowe. Already, the host of the *mhuruk-a* rise. A host beyond number who will lay waste to all our enemies, who will return to us the glory that was stolen from us. This is might of the Dag Maoudi! This is the power we bore in ancient times, when those who spoke of us trembled for fear of the *mhuruk-a*! We are revived! We are restored!"

As she speaks, the first *shed* leaps free of the ring, thunders at the heavens, shaking its mighty fists. It laughs, then springs into the air, concusses its being against solid rock, vanishes.

In its wake is an image planted like a bomb inside Ray's skull. A thought, instruction, *mission* bearing the weight of inevitability: a frozen tableau of Townshend Wright, Director of Whelemat, plotting betrayal, with flames leaping from his naked chest, terror stamped on his face, the odor of his immolating flesh thick in the air.

The visceral impact is stunning. For an instant, it stops him from breathing, quiets the raging chaos of his thoughts.

In that silence, there is another sensation, frail, whispered, urgent. Just a voice inside his head, counterpoint to so much impending violence.

Commune with me.

Madness. What did he think he was going to do? Just grab Emma by the hand and run off into the night, to some illusion of safety? Did he believe that would change anything?

Assess and evaluate, Jack said, and if it is a threat, eliminate the principals.

He's understood nothing, not until this moment, not until confronted with the limitless might of an inexhaustible supply of *shed*. The wrath and fury of the Dag Maoudi; the willingness to destroy everything to create a world they would own. A world born in blood, ruled by terror. And it was only the beginning.

This was the future Frederick Whiston had foreseen; the vision he had destroyed *Paraclete* to prevent. Frederick was the only one who had truly understood.

Only Frederick.

Ray wants to close his eyes. He wants to curl himself into a ball in a dark place and hide until the end of time.

Because Frederick had also known what must be done. With his last breath, with a heart full of twisted love and grieving and hatred, he had attempted to show Ray as well. The Dag Maoudi could not be allowed to possess the *shed* forever. Whatever the cost.

They could not be permitted to possess the child who could control the *shed* without blood. They would all of human space into a hell of their own devising.

So he lifts his hand a final time and directs the gun not at Amah, not at the Dag Maoudi, but presses the barrel against Emma's forehead.

He looks into her eyes, still longing for her even now. *What choice do I have? It has to stop here.*

Into his mind, the *mhuruk-a* speaks, pleading and urgent. *Commune with me.*

Another *shed* ascends from the ring, its ululations cavernous, bounding. Primed to lay waste to EED, Colonel Ritchie, the wicked hands of the FSA. Except for the *shed* no one moves. They're all transfixed by the gun, estimating his sanity.

"Stop it," Ray shouts. "Stop it now."

Amah lifts herself up from behind the lectern, exposing herself. She is seething, her dark eyes narrowed to slits and the muscles of her jaws bulging so that the blackened scars of her tattoos pulsate like living things. "What would you do? Kill the mother; kill the child. It accomplishes nothing."

"It keeps them out of your hands. It keeps you from controlling them, just like you controlled me."

But Amah dismisses him with a disgusted jerk of her head. "As long as the Dag Maoudi endure, there will be vessels, there will be the *mhuruk-a*, and there will be hope. You would kill her, this woman you love, who would bear the child of your loins, the child of promise, and all you would gain is time. And still, the *mhuruk-a* will serve us."

Another *shed* flung from the ring, greedy for destruction.

Again, the *mhuruk-a*, flooding his thoughts. *You were made to commune, as she was made to commune.*

"You can't go on killing in secret anymore. I've shown the people of Blackheath Grange the truth about the *Dao*. They've seen the *mhuruk-a* and finally understood what you've been doing all these years." At least he hopes so. He hopes they grasped the meaning of the *shed*. "They believe, and believing, they won't be cattle for you any longer."

"Then they, too, will be destroyed. And we will begin again. The Dag Maoudi endure; we bear with us the old ways, and they sustain us. As the Whistons have sustained us, as our own people did before, we always survive. And where we go, there are always men greedy for the touch and the power of the *mhuruk-a*."

"Not this way," Ray spits back. "Not with blood and sacrifice and murdered children. I won't allow it."

Amah barks at him, laughing. "Not this way, indeed. No longer are we bound to one *mhuruk-a*. One who has served with diligence, but whose strength wanes. Now they are a multitude. Now there will be more vessels, and none will stand before us. And one day, there will be another child."

Ray tugs the pistol's hammer back with his thumb. "Not in your lifetime."

She stares at him, weighs his intent, frowns. "Do not do this, Mr. Marlowe. Do not steal from us this child."

"I won't allow you to kill any more people. Any more *children*, just so you can rule the world."

"Is that what you have been told?" Amah says quietly. "That all we desire is power? The Dag Maoudi have remembered and tended to the *mhuruk-a* when all others forgot, learning from them. We have kept the old ways while the rest of mankind chased after science and technology. Humanity has given itself over to cowardice and weakness, hiding behind its machines, its devices. Turning its back on what it has always meant to be human. We have not possessed our universe, but merely inhabited it. This is what the *mhuruk-i* would teach us if we allow them."

Faint, almost beyond sense, the *shed* inside Emma whispers. *Commune and know.*

Amah frowns at him, at his stupidity. "The future we have offered you is a treasure beyond estimation. This is the purpose of your child. To make us rise. To open the gates that bar us from true communion with the *mhuruk-i*. We who have been faithful, the Dag Maoudi. We will rise, and we will be remade into a true humanity, a new breed of man who walk with the *mhuruk-i* as equals. We will be as gods over an old humanity, usurpers of the name, whose time has passed."

He could kill her now, this shriveled and hideous ape. "Enough of my friends have already died for your vision of a new humanity."

But Amah sighs as though overtaken by a great weariness. "In ancient times, there were men of wonder. Men of might and renown. Daed Faala, who could calm the seas with a brush of his arm, was such a man. Ruach Shin. Your King Solomon. Mohammed, Moses, Jesus. We call them wise, wondrous, workers of miracles. Into their hands was given the power of creation, the power to bend to their will the very structures of reality. And it was Daed Faala who bound the *mhuruk-a* in the Stone. It was Solomon who placed his *shed* in this ring. Why, I ask you?"

Why?

She doesn't wait for his answer. "Because they saw that we would wane, that men are wicked. That our knowledge would falter, and our blood would grow weak. And as we failed, we would not retain our place as brothers and sisters of the *mhuruk-i*, but would become their servants and slaves, lesser beings. There are no more mighty men among us. Instead, we must rely on tools and ritual, rites of blood to do what great men once did with will alone. And what they did, what they have always done, is to harness the power of the *mhuruk-i* and learn from them. Learn to become more than what we have been.

"There is no joy in the shedding of blood, and we know that the things we have done are terrible. But they *must* be done. We cannot lose the touch and wisdom of the *mhuruk-a*. It is our last hope of preserving what humanity has been, and what it was meant to become. Not to plunge ourselves into technology, into blindness, into the rituals of science, the mere manipulation of matter, but to truly inherit our birthright among the sentient universe. To craft an indelible niche for humanity. The Dag Maoudi would do this, but we must have a place free from the control of men where we can gather strength, where we can build fortresses against our own decline. Where we can bind the spirits and learn from them, and learning, recapture the greatness that was lost. It is the child of your union, the vessel and the one, who will accomplish this. A child that would be

perfect, the progenitor of a new race, and a new humanity.

"We would create mighty men once again, able to wield the power of the *mhuruk-i*. Glorious and free and godlike. It is the destiny of our species, Mr. Marlowe, and to achieve it, we would crush all who stand in our way. For all that we have done, all the innocents struck down, we are not monsters. We would preserve all of mankind."

This is what Emma has believed, Ray realizes, what she's believed her whole life, over all the years in which Amah has prepared her to be the vessel. Endure this, because the alternative is failure and suffering, the decline of the entire species. But through you, we can produce offspring with the power to bind up the essential stuff of the cosmos, defend humanity against decline and destruction.

Emma had spent her entire life believing she was sacrificing herself to save the world.

And if he let her live, let their child be born, she would go on believing it as the Dag Maoudi lied to her, twisted what she perceived, carved out a kingdom for themselves through manipulation and violence and exploitation of the *mhuruk-a*.

She believed she was saving them all. It was the only way she could make sense of the *Dao*.

Understanding descends on him like a weight, a stone as heavy as the universe itself. *Emma, sweet Emma, what have they done to you?*

Emma lifts her eyes to him, as though sensing his thoughts. No, not Emma, but the *mhuruk-a*, the *shed*. It drowns him in her gaze, searches and embraces and penetrates.

"Commune with me," it says. "Commune and know."

And not just the *mhuruk-a*, it seems to him, but somehow Emma, too. Emma and the *shed* entwined, so closely knit as to be the same being, both hungry, both wanting. Both pleading with him to commune at this moment.

The *shed* from the ring ascend more quickly now. He can see them in his peripheral vision, sense their emergence, their leaping and shouting and vanishing to chores of destruction. A score in the last minute, frenzied with purpose and frenzied to sate their lust for blood. They cast the glimpses of their victims into the ether like visions. Officers from the Port Authority, civic leaders, Whelemat board members, social luminaries. Anyone who would oppose the will of the Dag Maoudi.

Thomas Malcolm. Ray catches this image with the striking clarity of a hammer blow. Thomas Malcolm, crushed and mangled, his building imploded. *For passing secrets*, the *shed* seems to say.

Focus. Into Emma's gaze, burying himself.

"What? What do you want me to know?"

"Come and see." *Come and see.*

He hears Jack Holcomb, *Emma already knows, Ray. She is the vessel. She has already been changed. She was genetically constructed to emulate neural patterns with which and through which the shed could communicate. Just like you.*

Emma, who believes she is saving the world, who has shown always, forever, pure and blazing outrage at

those who would betray her, who has willingly accepted the burden of the *Dao*. Not because she has been deceived, but because she is the vessel. She can commune with the *shed*. She knows them and is known by them in ways he can only imagine.

And from her depth of knowledge, she asks him to trust her, the only other human being in the universe in a position to know the truth. *Come and see.*

If the *shed* are true If they wish us harm If they would save or damn If they lie If they would be the all in all the ancient of days the keepers

"Believe," the *shed* whispers. "There is nothing to fear. Believe, and you will rise."

He wavers for a time that seems infinite, beyond measurement, staring into the vast and placid depths of Emma's gaze, open to him beneath the relentless barrel of his gun. He hangs between ring and *shed*, Amah's dour and capable threat, the re-gathering community of the Dag Maoudi in the chamber, the wailing of children undefended--everything for which he is responsible. Everything she is asking him to release.

To commune.

To embrace his own being, his own revelation.

To rise.

At the last, to trust Emma, and with her to rise.

Assess and evaluate, Jack said.

He says, "I am and you are, and we are one."

He speaks, and he falls into her.

He falls, and as he plunges into a world of darkness, he also rises. A universe of stars without space, unformed, absent of distance, all of creation jammed into a pinpoint that is dense with potential. And yet immense in scope. It is everything and nothing, matter and void. It is all things and all places and outside of time. Beyond perception and understanding, the raw material of gods.

And he is formless consciousness, unbound being. He is everywhere at once, possessing all that has been made inside himself, and still he expands.

Where he expands, there are others like him, feathery, tickling awareness that brushes against his filigreed fringes of amorphous self. Where they touch him, he is known and they are known to him. Their being whispers tales of age beyond reckoning, of years measured in the radioactive decay of isotopes the way a tree counts the seasons in its rings. Their roots plunge deep into the fabric of space, into a bottomless well of dark matter and liquid, plastic chaos.

And he is aware that these consciousnesses are not *shed*. They are not anything known to him or the exploration and history of man. They name them themselves in signs and symbols that express sprawling concepts of being, culture, definition, and he grasps it all and holds them in his mind. He embraces them, and they trickle, laughing, through his hands like water from spring. Their number is beyond counting, but he also touches them one and all, individually, each one unique and particulated. He accepts that they are, and he is not overwhelmed.

He glides into a nursery of stars, the superheated depths of compressing matter, of rending gravity, and it smells to him of musk and strawberries. He watches the gathering of cosmic dust and thermonuclear detonation, and there is joy in the binding and the forming and the creation. There is joy in the frigid loneliness of the gulf between stars flung from the cradle. There is joy in being, like a song woven into the dance of element and energy. A song that is purpose. A song that rises.

He knows things no man has ever known. He clutches an awareness of the basic engines of creation, of the manner for knitting quarks and electrons, molecules and atoms. Anything he can envision, he can perform. Anything he chooses, he can do. Anything he seeks, he can find. Knowledge expands within him, and there is no want, no lack, no worry. The bones of the universe are there to be laid bare at his command. But he also feels its harmony. He pulses with its song, and what he conceives is not just his will, but his will as reflected within a consciousness of the will of everything else.

He is, and they are, and all of them are one. They are not alone, and they are cognizant of one another, always in harmony, one grand and encompassing will and being.

It's all here. Everything that ever was, is and will be. If he chose, he could page through each discrete instant of human history, experience it from every possible perspective, within the perception of every mind, all at once. He could share the glory of the foundation of timeless Rome. He could scale the heights of Kilimajaro with the wandering *Australopithecus africanus*. He could count the hordes of the Khans as they swept across the Mongol plains. Or taste the nectar of primordial soup at the instant life emerged. But he doesn't need to, because he knows it all. He becomes all. Everything is fluid, changeable, unmoored, unlinear. And if he wanted, he could cast it all down. He could blot it from existence. Destroy it, but it would still be, a memory with the substance of reality. Both truths existing together, equally true, equally eternal.

A state of pure potentiality, this is the reality. This is what it is to rise.

The height is dizzying, beyond him, a twisting spiral of vertigo.

So the *shed* comes to him, speaks directly to his being. Not the *shed* as he has known it before, in the form of a man or even in its own body of tentacle and flipper and cool, black eyes, but as itself, as consciousness separated from biology. Just as he is.

You see as we see, know as we know, are as we are. In communion, all things are possible. In communion, you may perceive with the mind of God.

Yes.

You see what a frail creature is man? Bound to the substance of flesh, unwilling to rise, isolated within husks. Each one a universe unto himself, without cognizance of one another, each entity alone, alien, without reference and communication.

Yes.

This is true freedom. From want, from lack, from isolation. This is the community of being where all things may be known and all things exist. Whatever you imagine can be. Here, all things are just, all things are possible, all things are immortal. This is where we would lead your kind to be. It is the inheritance reserved for your seed.

To rise. To become gods and control the universe. Not just to manipulate, but to create. It's right there in front of him, unlimited possibility, and what he has touched is only the fringes of the truth. Imperfect knowledge. His child, Emma's child, and all who came after would know perfectly.

This is what Jack Holcomb perceived in the *shed*. The next logical step in human evolution.

It's also what the Dag Maoudi have foreseen. A future for which they would shatter everyone and everything around them. A glory they would possess at any cost.

And Frederick Whiston, he saw it as well, but only in terms of Dag Maoudi exploitation.

All of it, imperfect knowledge. Symbols without context.

And Emma? All she wanted was to rise.

Ray, he would rise with her. He and Emma and their child of promise together.

I am and you are, and we are one.

Turning their backs on everything mankind has built to become something new and limitless, something in harmony with the consciousness of the *shed*. Rejecting the inheritance of mud and violence and contempt, of exploitation. Joining the celestial chorus. Perfect being, unfettered.

In his vastness, he reaches out. He extends himself to the limit of his perceptual horizon, and finds multiple billion sentient beings, all of them singing in harmony with the universe, all of them reaching out to him with knowledge and wisdom, all of them with wonders to share. Deeper, farther, stretching to the extremes of his awareness, and he senses her at last. She is joy, and pleasure, glorious. He approaches her, circling, and she's not alone. Inside her is the burgeoning consciousness of their child, a being of pure light, growing, pulsating, living. And the thrumming of life emanating from the child is the rhythm and the song of the universe itself.

He reaches for her, then, and knows her. Everything that she is, has ever been. All that she's seen and thought and experienced. Ray holds her essence inside himself like the remembered scent of the first flowers of spring.

He touches her, and she touches him in turn, and they are one.

Touching her, he chooses.

"One," he says. "We are one."

And choosing, he finds others of the *shed*, not as he has perceived them, but as they are, rank upon rank, stunning in their thousands and tens of thousands. Conscious, singing, the hidden soul of a distant world, cast adrift, pursued by disaster and chaos. Weary they came to an infant planet, the bones of matter, the essence of earth. Their thoughts became dreams of men, strange and wild. Their flesh slumbers in the deep, in chasms of night, in frozen seas. Through cold space and strange eons they came; when man was young they were already ancient, and aged and filled with grim loneliness. And from their bodies sprang life, and they became entities of consciousness, form without substance.

Ghosts of themselves.

And men dreamed of them. Some believed and rose. Some believed, and believing, fashioned visions of power.

All that time, the *shed* bid them only to rise.

We seek only habitation; a space in which to live free. In harmony with mankind.

Some believed and made themselves vessels of light, mighty men capable of fashioning great things. Others believed, but rejected harmony and learned to bind the spirits of the *shed* in labyrinths of stone and ring.

Rest and habitation after long travail. Coexistence. And in return, we will teach you all the secrets of the universe so that you want for nothing.

In return.

In return for coexistence.

And Ray remembers what Emma said to him, that night in the garden. *She comes. And when she's here, she's everything. Nothing of me remains, only mhuruk-a. And I am her vessel. It's what I was born to become, what all the Whiston daughters have been bred to become--summoners and channels for the spirit of the place. Spirit made flesh. Because it's the flesh that makes us human, animals, beings bound to land and cycle and rhythm. Rutting like pigs makes us human, and it's the only way the mhuruk-a can touch them. The two made one, spirit made flesh. They fuck the vessel and join themselves with the spirit of the place, bind themselves to the essential rhythm.*

The two made one, spirit made flesh.

Jack Holcomb saying, *obedience changes us...and it is only through this change that we are able to commune.*

And, *the shed are Ialdabaoth's attempt to supplant humans as the pinnacle of creation.*

Finally, at Ba'dai, the *shed* had said to him, *poor of vigilance is this creature, man. Your kind cannot help but stumble.*

It's there, all of it, all of the answers, waiting to be touched.

To become like the *shed*, to commune, to gain complete knowledge is to choose coexistence.

Man, formed from the dust of the cosmos, isolated in flesh, individualized.

The deathless *shed*, spirit, form without substance except for that which they create.

We seek only habitation. Vessels of light.

Vessels of mud. It's the flesh that makes us human.

The truth washes over him like a flood, devastating everything in its path.

He breathes, plunges, drops back into his physical form. His own body, cells singing, a matrix of symbiotic organisms feeding and growing and yearning. The heart pushing blood, the muscles contracting, the lungs expanding, all in harmony.

He blinks, and the world springs into being, created new, illuminated.

He looks into Emma's eyes, and he remembers.

He is conscious of all things, of his own synaptic flurry, of the frenetic storm of his expansion. He inhales, and

tastes blood, but also dust and sweat...and knowledge. Awareness of the activity of those who call themselves brothers, the *shed*, constrained by the will and the desire of the Dag Maoudi. He sees with their collective vision, the city in chaos, the airfield in flames, great columns of fire and twisted steel, conflagrations burning out of control. The fluttering wings of death, the wonders they have wrought, wailing.

The wonders they have wrought. With blood. With sharpening the minds of men like knives. With whispering to those who would listen that there was power and knowledge in communion. Teaching them to deceive themselves.

They have carried devastation to Blackheath Grange and called it joy.

Jack was wrong, believing that the *shed* were exploited. The Dag Maoudi were wrong, believing the *shed* would bear them into a grand future. Even Emma was wrong, because she was the vessel, believing the lie that the *shed* would lead them all to rise.

Only Frederick Whiston had truly understood. Poor, broken, defeated Frederick Whiston. *Your seed will open the door to chaos through which the mhuruk-a and all her kind will enter and devour us all.*

And for understanding, the *shed* had killed him.

To rise is to sell all of mankind into bondage. That was the legacy his child was to bear.

Once, Amah said to him, *You cannot have Emma and anything else. It is Emma or those other things. To love her, to cling to her, is to accept the destruction of all else that has made you who you are.*

In this, at least, she had it right.

Emma would always be the vessel, always the keeper and key to the door through which the *shed* would come. She was the pivot upon which the future of humanity turned, the most perilous being in human space, in the history of mankind.

Conscious of the complete universe, of all that he could grasp, all the promises of the *shed*, all that he loves, he returns to this place of flickering lights and children's blood and bleak stone walls, where he stands in his own flesh with a gun in his hand, staring into the eyes of the woman who believes she would save the world.

His heart beats. He exhales. He tastes her on his lips. He hears her in his thoughts. He is one with her for a perfect, eternal instant.

It is a terrible burden to bear, he thinks, to save or damn. Terrible beyond imagining.

Then he pulls the trigger and blots her from existence.

From New Holyoke and Terra and uncharted, cavernous skies beyond the knowledge of man, the *shed* sense and know and shriek in fury.

And hurtling from all their wild and distant lands, their bleak suns and darkling caverns, they come for him, greedy for blood.

Amah shrieks at him, too. Amah and the ancient Dag Maoudi, here in their secret temple, stunned by consternation and anger and failure. Can they feel it, Ray wonders. Can they feel the thunderous approach of

this storm of *shed*?

"What have you done?" Amah cries, and there is real grief in her voice. "What have you done?"

Is it grief for Emma, who she has raised almost from birth? Or for the collapse of her schemes, all of their schemes?

Ray doesn't care, really. It's not in him to care. He can hardly think. His bones have transubstantiated into lead, his muscles to sand. His head is a stone, thick and solid and heavy as the world Atlas bears on his shoulders. And he's not strong enough to bear so much weight.

He falls to his knees, head bowed, hands in his lap. Blood. There's blood everywhere. Spilling up from the troughs where the Dag Maoudi have killed the children, where he in turn struck down the Dag Maoudi, radiating toward him in a wide and viscous pool, red as a vein of deep mountain rubies, from Emma's body. It soaks her gown, blackens the thick and velvet fabric. She is so pale next to this darkness of blood, her skin white and marbled with veins. Her legs jumbled at unnatural angles and her arms stopped in the act of flailing, her mouth and eyes open wide in an expression like surprise. The top of her skull sheared completely away. Just splinters of bone and blood and her wondrous, shattered hair.

And somehow, impossibly, horribly, he can still hear her breathing--a wet, fatal rattling in her chest. He couldn't even make it quick for her in the end.

He is weak, so unbearably weak. He can't stand to look at her.

So he contemplates the gun in his hand, its ferocious solidity and lethal weight, as grim as an accusation of murder.

One bullet remains. Just one. Always save the last one for yourself--that's what he used to tell his bright and anxious troops on the morning of battle, with the blistering New Mes sun just tipping the hills and the desert bathed red with portent in its early light.

He's done his part, more than that. Let the rest of human space just go to hell. He's earned that much, hasn't he? The right to stop caring? And it's really just a moot point. He can do it himself, right now, the same way he did Emma, then fall beside her. Or he can wait for the boundless *shed* to do it for him. Not much of a choice, that.

But there's a child crying, whose terror and confusion rings off the walls, desperate, maddening. A survivor of so much blood and cacophony, lies and betrayals. And unthinking, instinctually, Ray turns his head toward the sound of the meek, warbling sobs. The child is there, naked to the waist, without shoes, feet stained crimson almost to the ankles from marching through gore, his hands bound behind his back.

Run pirates, run pirates, run pirates, hey!

John Robert Rose, the boy from *Paraclete*.

Where, Ray thinks, is Captain Shadow when you need him?

And the *shed* come, plummeting through frozen space and dense New Holyoke rock, wrenching themselves from tasks of Dag Maoudi vengeance. They drop from the apex of the dome like arrows of fire, raging with shouts and virulence. A dozen, a score, a hundred. They crowd the space of the temple from floor to groining and still they flood in, standing outside of time, beyond dimension. Greedy and hungry and brimming with dark lust.

They reap a harvest of blood from the wise and ancient Dag Maoudi.

Amah watches, her eyes bulging, and throws her hands over her face. Because the *shed*, the *shed* in fury, they rend. They tear. They gnaw. Without the blood to sate them, they feed like predators. Only sacrifice makes them pliable.

And Ray hears them inside his mind. Their rumble and echo, their savage thirst and howling. *Betrayer! Mahnach-ta! Liar!*

"Ray."

Emma. A whispered exhalation, no more than that.

"No," he says. Shakes his head. It's too much to bear.

Torturous, gasping breath, stumble of words. *"I am the vessel. Still."*

He hears her above the clangor and wrath of the *shed*, and he lifts his eyes to her. He looks because he has to, because she demands it of him, because even with her waning life, she would tell him this one last thing.

"Emma?"

He looks, and he sees. Around her neck, the fine, golden chain, pulled taut like a pendulum's wire. He remembers so much, too much, everything at once. Dinner at Frankie V's, his clumsy scattering of rings. The flight in the podship and his sudden, barking terror when he realized it wasn't on her finger. *I told you to wear it. Amah wouldn't let me. She said it wasn't proper, that I should give it back to you.*

I am the vessel, and the vessel is myself. To touch the infinite of contemplation is to lose us both, vessel and being.

The two made one, spirit made flesh.

Still. I am the vessel. Still.

Emma, risen and glorified and heir to all the knowledge of the *shed*, shows him what it is he must do. Because she trusts him, she believes in him. He has murdered her, and still she believes.

In horror, he understands. Even now, she would save all of mankind.

The *shed* finish with the Dag Maoudi, spend centuries of their collective rage at rings and rites and steles, of men who would dare to place themselves beyond vengeance. As one, they advance. They cast off their human likenesses, and sprawl their thought-form, matterless substance from wall to wall. They drip memories of chilled and stagnant waters, of the thin bones of blinded fish, of mud and the weight of countless billion hectares of ocean. They radiate gusts of furnace heat and cruel, relentless suns, trickles of fine, windbourne sand and storm scored rock. They steam with the fetid humidity of noisome jungles and lost and lonely mountain paths. Gray and rubber-skinned, amorphous, staring with lidless, ebony eyes.

They come, growling.

Betrayer! Mahnach-ta!

Ray moves, scrambling to her side, tearing open the blood soaked gown. Ring and chain, worn like a

keepsake, a treasure clutched and admired and pondered like love. He snatches it up, snaps the chain, holds the ring between thumb and forefinger. Then her hand, held tight, like a groom and his bride.

"You were always beyond my comprehension," he says to her, and hearing, she smiles.

Ray shoves the ring onto her finger.

Emma inhales, sharp and gasping. Her eyes spring wide--shock, dismay, despair--her chest fills with breath like the sudden inflation of a liferaft. It arches her body at an angle so severe, the tendons in her neck *creak*. And her rushing, blood-clotted exhalation is the howl and fury of the *mhuruk-a* imprisoned in living flesh.

The two made one.

No, not two. Vessel and *shed* and the genetic blueprint of the child of promise. A perfect trinity.

And the *shed*, the *shed* in their congregation of hundreds blanch, mutter, lash out in dire and virulent frenzy. They drown him in elemental fire, assault his bones with spectral acid, melt and desiccate and pulp the rag of his flesh. They excoriate his nerves with bitter, rasping curses. They spike their collective will into his soul. To destroy, to unmake, to erase him from the remembering of man and *shed* and god alike.

And what Ray feels is nothing. It passes over him like a wave. Because he is the one, was born the one. He is *shed* in consciousness. He has risen, and rising, he is beyond the grasp of their power.

He rises now, taking up Emma's body. He bears her to the great ring crafted in the time of Solomon, buried beneath the sands of New Mes as years rolled on in their unending thousands, as men lived and married, spilled blood, bore sons, withered beneath the blistering sun and forgot the ancient and sacred ways. They *forgot*, and the death of knowledge was good.

Only the *shed*, lurking, spinning, shimmering like mercury, scheming all the time--only they remembered the truth.

To them, Ray says, "You can all fucking go to hell."

Speaks it and wills it and releases his sacrifice, his beloved, into the gateway of chaos, the void of dreamless night, the living death of the *mhuruk-i*.

From first to last, the *shed* raise up a cry to rend the heavens, and vanish into the ring.

For a time that Ray measures in eons, there is silence. Then he turns, and behind him is Amah, matriarch and last of the Dag Maoudi. Stiff and stern and hideous, she stands and considers him.

She bows low to him. She prostrates herself at his feet, as though he's become an idol.

"You were not the one as we deemed it," she says. "But you are wise, Mr. Marlowe. Mighty and wise."

It takes everything within him, all his grief and aching and weariness, not to kick her in the head. Maybe he'll get to that later, after he's located the explosives hut, after he's carefully placed the necessary charges, after he has crashed the cliff honeycombed with mine shafts and dark, evil places in upon temple, ring, *shed*, so that no one will ever discover what is hidden here. Perhaps not for eternity, but until long after men have forgotten the lore of Ahriman and the Dag Maoudi, when the *shed* have passed entirely from human memory.

But he has other responsibilities right now.

Empty, he walks away from Amah and across the floor to John Robert Rose and the remaining children of the Trust. He gathers them together, six or seven, and embraces them one at a time, offers them comfort. He whispers promises of safety, of protection, of an end to suffering. He unbinds their hands and covers them as best he can, but John Robert he holds to his chest as though he'll never let him go.

In his ear, the John Robert says: "You came for me. I knew you would."

Ray bows his head, grips the boy as tightly as he dares.

And when the children are able, he leads them home.

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